OBEDIENCE

A TALE

by

MICHAEL SADLEI

author of Privilege

NOVELS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

DESOLATE SPLENDOUR

PRIVILEGE

PUBLISHED BY CONSTABLE

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G. H. Grubb
from Michael Sadleir

Feb 1925

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THIS STORY
IS INSCRIBED TO
ANN
IN ANTICIPATION OF
HER TENTH BIRTHDAY
AND THAT SHE MAY LEARN
HOW
HALF A CENTURY AGO
WHEN FATHERS WERE FIERCE
AND MOTHERS MILD
A DAUGHTER
FARED
BETWEEN THE TWO
AND
(HAVING LEARNT)
MAY DRAW
HER OWN CONCLUSIONS

CHAPTER ONE

You must have knowledge of Fleddon in the 'sixties; for with that rich complacent decade of our English heritage this story has concern. The tale of Catherine and Frank, if it has purpose other than mere entertainment, is a tale as much of changing England as of a maiden's constancy, is no more of a love story than a lament for one of many epochs dead.

Great days for Fleddon were those easy prosperous days, when old Sir Harry Ormond hunted his own hounds over his own and neighbouring lands; when at long last the railway came; when once a most exalted personage dwelt overnight at Fleddon Park, laying a foundation stone and giving an august blessing to the agricultural college that was to rise beyond the boundary of the little town.

Maybe, in the alleys below the cattle-market and along the river-side, poverty was sharp; maybe, election times saw less of rivalry than of kind condescension masking Ormond threats; certainly, farms scattered on the stony uplands, that stretched northward from the town, dreaded the landlord's bailiff more than the hand of God, for Ormond interest grasped and ever more closely gripped, while Providence struck hard enough but rarely.

Such obscure miseries as these, however, troubled the solid townsfolk little, and were unknown within the walls of Fleddon Park. Sir Harry told his wife and daughters only things suited to their womanish intelligence, and to the number of such things belonged nor tenants' grievances, nor necessary shifts in Tory politics, nor those regrettable but heaven-ordered inequalities that are inseparable from oligarchy. As for the citizens of Fleddon, with shops dependent on the Ormond bounty and charities that waited on Sir Harry's lead, they lived their daily round and drank their evenings through in the warm bar of the Ormond Arms, and flocked to meets and walked the steep grass drives of the Park on Sundays or gossiped in the sunny market-place, and were content (or seemed to be content) with Fleddon and its comfortable calm, over which brooded the pale Gothic beauty of the Abbey church.

In days to come, when feudal glories had begun to fade, the Abbey church became an economic stay to Fleddon life as firm and as essential as had ever Ormond been; for tourists—Scottish and American—came every summer in their thousands to gape untutored wonder at the old glass in the tall soaring windows, to flute high-pitched conventional expertise over the woodwork of the chancel stalls, the crotchets of the font canopy and the unique flamboyant finials of the pews. These tourists would eat, and dabble for antiques ; and every moment of their visit set money wandering up and down the little town, called into being summer industries, lined pockets and filled coal cellars against the desolate winter, when were few visitors, but only bleak north winds, creeping discomfortably across the frozen fields and along the narrow valley of the Glaive, whisking about the Abbey buttresses, flecking the market-place with little eddying cones of dust.

But this was the Fleddon of a later epoch, the Fleddon of the flaccid cultivated eighteen-nineties and of the early years of a new and unenlightened century. The 'sixties set the Park above the Abbey, knowing that all of good in England flowed from God and Queen Victoria, judging that deity and queen alike had given dignity to Ormond, but that Her Majesty could claim no share, either in the beauties or in the virtue of the church. From the logic of such reasoning was no escape ; God's House must be content to follow Fleddon Park in dignity. Wherefore a local guide-book, published in eighteen fifty-nine, gives pride of place to the well-timbered grounds and noble mansion of the house of Ormond, then only passing, after grandiloquent description of that mansion's somewhat pallid splendours, to an enumeration of the town's archæological monuments, even among which the Abbey church is not the first, the Wishing Well and the few yards of dubious Roman paving having precedence.

Doubtless the compiler of the guide-book knew his business. He was a man of Fleddon, and had his dwelling there. His very hearthstone owed its warmth to Ormond bounty, and Sir Harry, though a genial man enough, suffered no slights on his importance or on the divine right of his local power. That he himself was jealous of the Abbey church would be a foolish formulation of a mere attitude of mind; nevertheless, there had been more than a hint of such jealousy among his ancestors, and children willy-nilly breathe up parental prejudice, though they remain unconscious all their lives of half the influence of early years.

Imagine, first, the Fleddon of Sir Harry's time. The river Glaive, flowing from Cotswold uplands Severn-wards, swept, then as now, in a wide bend round the high, wooded promontory of Fleddon Park. Between the hill's foot and the river clustered, then as now, the town of Fleddon—its heart the market-place, the Abbey church its diadem. But whereas the Fleddon of to-day has spread beyond the river and in rising terraces up the more gradual slope to southward, in the ’sixties only scattered cottages were built thus separated from the town itself, and were regarded scornfully as an outlying suburb. Between the river, then, and the hill-side that walled the valley on the north, the small grey town was huddled. Above it rose the grass and woodland of Sir Harry Ormond’s park, and near the top—just far enough below the crest to find some shelter from the wind—ranged the long flat façade of Sir Harry Ormond’s home.

Around the house were pleasure gardens, so designed as to make full use of the natural terrace chosen as building site. Apart, however, from this area of comparatively level ground, the park was steeply up and down, commanding lovely views over the town of Fleddon to the southward, as well as to the east and west, in both of which directions the land fell rapidly towards the curving river.

What bearing, you will ask, has this on rivalry between the Abbey and the Park? Consider, please, their relative geographies. From the low level of the market-place the church tower rose one hundred and thirty feet into the air, dominating the old town, the marshes and the little hills beyond the river; but only the highest pinnacles of that most lovely tower were visible from the lawn of

Fleddon Park, while a man standing at an upper window of the house itself could look down upon the tower-leads or, if his gaze were straight, look over them entirely.

That this was so bore witness to triumphant Ormond policy. The eighteenth century had faith in gesture, and the builder of the Fleddon mansion-house went to his grave in seventeen forty-five, complacent in that he had, by choosing this new and lofty station for the house of Ormond, at least physically overtopped his rival. The family's then existing home was sound and beautiful, but had in Ormond eyes this fatal fault—that it lay nearly at river level and as though round the corner from the church enthroned. Wherefore its jealous owner tore it down, and had no other impulse in squandering his wealth on painful demolition of an old well-built house and in the costly erection of a new pretentious one, save the (to us childish) impulse to outdo the House of God.

He had his triumph and, as remarked, fell happily to sleep in the dramatic year of 'forty-five. For near three-quarters of a century the Abbey's champions bided their time. Four Ormonds and full half a dozen clerics came and went. Then, in the troublous days that followed Waterloo, hazard gave to the church sensational revenge. The reigning Ormond, badly hit at Quatre Bras, died in the autumn of Napoleon's defeat. His widow, with her little boy, lingered in London. Fleddon Park was shut and empty. The cruel winter dragged its length; gave place to the starved spring and summer of 'sixteen. From one end of England to the other was distress and murmuring. In Fleddon and its neighbourhood the winter of that cruel year found suffering labourers, farmers in bankruptcy, and silence in the stark box-like mills that squatted grimly on the river-banks. The slums grew restless; the local agitators sent an angry whisper round the miserable hovels of the poor. But discontent, that might have ended in Fleddon—as in so many other places—with the sacking of a few shops, found an unexpected outlet.

There came to Fleddon a wandering visionary, half-agitator and half-priest. The Reverend John Carver (such the name he used) would in himself provide a novel's theme. He had the fanatic's true blend of sympathy and bitterness. Well-read in history, he had stored his mind with all the cruelties of feudalism, choosing to forget its fineness and nobility. He affected, in his ardour for divine authority, to resent the political impotence of God in matters secular. He did not claim that power should lie with the Church of England or with the Papacy or with the Wesleyans—only with God. The age-long struggle between lords temporal and spiritual was to his passionate mind a living issue, which, when he learnt of quarrels in the past between the Ormonds and the

Church, acquired at once a local application. Full of an angry pity for the misery around him and fiercely conscious of his mission as God's sword-bearer, he saw a golden opportunity. The popular Sir Marcus Ormond was dead and his heir a little child whom no one knew; the poor of Fleddon were inflamed and suffering. One Sunday from the market cross he preached a daring sermon (the doctrines became so inflammatory that their expounder was removed by force before his peroration was complete) and, two nights later, the stables and the whole range of granaries and farm-buildings that straggled up the last slope of the hill behind the Ormond mansion were blazing furiously. "This night," wrote the Reverend John Carver in his journal (a document discovered long after he was dead and in part made public) "the great ones of the earth had opportunity to take heed of the Almighty militant."

In time the little Felix Ormond grew to manhood, was told the story of his burning granaries and, most unjustly, taught to blame the Anglican establishment for a fanaticism that was none of theirs. He pondered his revenge and took it.

The rector of Fleddon (now identified, for all his predecessor's innocence and his own greater guiltlessness, with the disastrous John Carver) was a man of strong character and pronounced opinions, with whom Sir Felix

Ormond had no difficulty in coming to a disagreement. A plan occurred to the baronet by which he might at once inconvenience his personal opponent and vindicate the supremacy of his family over the Church. He convinced himself that the architectural beauty of the Abbey outdid unsuitably in material emphasis the signs of Ormond dignity visible in the market square. To redress the balance in favour of the Park, he determined to set the seal of Ormond on the very centre of the town. Between his drive-gates and the square were various tenements and the fine house in which the rector's sister lived. All was Ormond property. The leases most conveniently lapsed; at six months' notice the unfortunate spinster was bidden to find another home—a process which the Ormond agent made no easier than was necessary—and in due course the various buildings were ruthlessly demolished. Sir Felix then prolonged his carriage-drive and built a vast baronial gatehouse that dominated the north side of the market-place. That done, he was content. Had he not proved that house of man could bulk as largely in the heart of Fleddon as did House of God?

Unluckily for posterity, baronial building in the 'forties tended to obesity, to too emphatic buttresses and to rounded towers. The gatehouse was a horror; nor could the Boar of Ormond, set in high relief above the archway of the carriage-gate, give dignity to what was only bombast. For full sixty years the Fleddon market-place suffered this violation of its loveliness. The mind of man is in few things more crass and obstinate than in acceptance of what is, than in resentment of what need not be; wherefore the ugliness of Ormond Gate found many to defend it and to shake heads over the impatience (if nothing worse) of young Sir John, who in the twentieth century succeeded unexpectedly to title and estates, and in the course of an orgy of iconoclasm swept the thing away.

"They do say, sir, that when the former Sir Felix built it, he took pride in laying his finger on the town that was his own."

Jack Ormond shrugged.

"The old boy should have left a nicer finger-mark," he said.

Thus Fleddon's owner in the nineteen hundreds. The 'sixties, on the other hand,were either more dutiful or less self-conscious. Sir Harry saw no fault in Ormond Gate. It gave access to his home, and that was reason for its being there. He was as unconcerned to remedy the landscape as to renew his father's challenge to the Church. Indeed, although he used it many times a week, he could not have described his gate-house to a stranger. It would have shocked him, rather, to be asked to do so.

CHAPTER TWO

I

On a late summer afternoon in the year eighteen hundred and sixty-eight three ladies sat beneath the cedars on the lawn at Fleddon Park. The sun was dipping in the west and lit the uneven grey of the long house-front to a warm drab. The air was very soft and still.

" You may say what you like, mamma ; I *hate* him ! "

Lady Ormond rustled still more deeply into her wide chair.

" Surely ' hate ' is a little strong, my dear ? " she said mildly. " Young ladies should choose their words. Besides, what has he done that you dislike him so ? "

Catherine tossed her head and pouted with the unreason of twenty-three.

" His shoulders are crooked—"

" Are they ? " replied the mother indifferently. " I never noticed them to be so."

" —and he's mean and ugly and—and generally horrid . . ."

The vehemence of prejudice swept Catherine Ormond beyond the narrow limits of her vocabulary. She was conscious of having spoken foolishly, of looking still more foolish; she knew that Charlotte was watching; she feared that behind the anxiety of sisterly regret gleamed in those sombre eyes a light almost of malice. Had Charlotte seen? How much did Charlotte know? Behind the soft curve of her lips Catherine set her small white teeth. Youth and youth's pride in secret liberty flamed suddenly within her. Charlotte might hint and probe and preach, but never a word's admission should she get.

Lady Ormond spoke again:

"You are too violent, child. I think you will agree that you hardly know Mr. Crossley well enough to judge so sweepingly. Your father likes him, and after all, he is more experienced than you."

Simultaneously with defiance toward her sister came to Catherine a softening and a pity toward her mother. She felt suddenly guilty before the voluminous patience of her mother's attitude. Leaning forward she patted the plump arm that hung loose beside the lady's chair.

"I am sorry, mamma," she murmured. "I spoke hastily."

Lady Ormond, in restored serenity, smiled at her younger daughter. She was glad to leave a subject that had been raised only from motives of duty and in obedience to Sir Harry's order. Vaguely she had wondered why her little Catherine need thus rapidly be married off. When her husband commanded that the topic be re-opened with all maternal tact and firmness, the good lady had made tentative objection. The girl was very young. How much more comfortable to let things go on as they were and had been; to keep the child at home and still enjoy her quiet help and easy cheerfulness. The house was not so gay that it could lose its brightest inmate without suffering for the loss. But Sir Harry had been obdurate. "The girl has had ample time to learn self-control," he had declared. "Crossley may come any day. She must realise her responsibility in the matter." So Lady Ormond had yielded, as she had always yielded—but her mind was unquiet and her conscience not at rest.

Now if Charlotte were in question—Charlotte who was already twenty-eight. . . . Her suitors had come, gestured feebly and retired. Lady Ormond, in the gentle depths of her heart, could understand and forgive their fickleness; she pitied Charlotte, but knew her for her own worst enemy. The note of ambition was a little audible; a man wishes his wife to further *his* schemes and not her own. With a little start the mother roused herself. Charlotte was speaking.

"You will spoil your work, Catherine, if you gaze about you all the time. Embroidery needs care, you know."

Catherine coloured slightly and her head drooped over her task.

" What is it you are making, darling ? "

Caressingly sweet the voice of a fourth lady who had now come silently to join the group beneath the Fleddon cedars. This was Aunt Letty. " Aunt Letty is so *kind* " Catherine had been taught to say. " Kind Aunt Letitia " was an Ormond *cliché*. " I am sure " Charlotte would say in her reproving mood, " I am sure, Catherine, that no girls ever had a *kinder* aunt than our dear Aunt Letty ; we should try to give her pleasure, even though by so doing we go against our own inclinations."

And to kind Aunt Letty Catherine made reply :

" I am working a smoking cap, auntie, for my Uncle James."

The newcomer settled in a wicker chair and spread her sewing on her knees.

" A fortunate uncle, indeed ! I had thought the pretty trifle meant for Felix. Dear Felix ! How handsome he is ! I declare, Mary, that when he called on us in London a few months ago I said to Frederick—after the boy had gone—that I never met a handsomer young man, although I go about a great deal. When do you expect him home ? "

Lady Ormond sat motionless and her small rounded hands neither twitched nor stirred. Yet was she thinking rapidly, asking herself (somewhat as Catherine had done a moment earlier) how much of dear Letitia's pleasant speech were kindliness and how much probing.

What did Letitia know? But of thought or urgency she made no sign, answering in leve tones her sister-in-law's inquiry.

"We *hope* to-morrow. But Felix has many friends and cannot always adjust his plans as he would like."

"How much you will like that, girls, will you not?" cried Aunt Letitia. "A brother is such a help and protection to his sisters. I expect he will take you to garden parties and drive you out and give you all manner of pleasure!"

"Perhaps he will take us to Lord Lypiatt's. Would you like that, Catherine?"

At her sister's words Catherine flushed painfully and bit her lip. Then with an effort, answered quietly:

"Very much. I hear it is an interesting house. But Mr. Crossley would probably not invite us."

"Did you say 'Crossley,' darling?" asked her aunt. (It was one of Aunt Letitia's trials to be slightly deaf. In consequence, she would sometimes cause unwelcome revival of a theme successfully disposed of, or, as in this case, bring conversation back to a point whence others present had with deliberate care escaped.) "Because, if so, I recollect meeting a Mr. Crossley at the duchess's—not *your* duchess, of course, Mary; the Duchess of Wendover—the duke was minister for a short time, you know, and Frederick had naturally a deal to do with him—Mr. *Philip* Crossley I think he was. He seemed a delightful young man and is, I was told, heir to a fine property. Of course——"

"Philip Crossley is Lord Lypiatt's eldest son, Letitia," said Lady Ormond calmly. "They live about ten miles from here."

She rose slowly from her chair.

"I am going in. I have letters to write. Do not sit out too long, girls; the evenings get rather chilly. Letitia, if you would be good enough to spare the time, I should like to go through a pattern-book from Marshalls. You are so clever at choosing."

"Dear Mary! Of *course!* I live to help others. I am sure, as Frederick says——"

But Lady Ormond was already on the terrace, her broad, indifferent back swaying steadily for desk and pattern-book.

For a few moments after their elders' disappearance, the two girls sewed industriously. Then Charlotte crossed the lawn to the chair lately occupied by Lady Ormond.

"Cathy, dear," she said gently. "You *will* be careful, won't you?"

Catherine did not turn her head. Her needle stabbed.

"Oh!" she cried, and carried the blood spot to her lips. Then, over the barrier of white hand and sucking steadily, she looked her sister in the face:

"What do you mean?"

The words were indistinct, their passage hindered by the wounded finger. Maybe to that obstruction was due the abruptness of the tone. A shadow flitted over Charlotte's grave brown eyes.

"Don't keep me at arm's length, Cathy," she pleaded. "We have lately been such friends. And I only want to help. Suppose it had been papa or Felix or even Mr. Chater—that had——"

The younger sister drooped long eye-lashes; over the creamy brown of her skin crept another of those tell-tale blushes. So Charlotte *had* seen! But how much? And what would happen? What could be stopped happening? Outwardly calm, though her heart beat fast, she played pathetically for a time.

"You are so mysterious, Lottie! Suppose *what* had been papa or Felix or even Mr. Chater?"

"Oh, Cathy, Cathy. Must you pretend with *me*?"

Must she pretend? That was indeed the question. A longing to tell all to Charlotte seized and shook her. Once before she had nearly told her mother; but the chance had passed. Now was another golden opportunity. 'Tell her!' cried conscience. 'Tell her now!'

But it would seem that hazard of circumstance and human fads are ever ranged against one's wiser impulses. Catherine had all but opened her lips to share her secret with her sister, when she observed that from the bead chain, hung about Charlotte's neck, dangled a small gold cross. This cross had been a gift from an early and a favoured suitor, who had been curate to the Reverend Theodore Chater, then as now rector of Fleddon. Catherine, at that time a hoyden of seventeen, had hated her sister's clerical admirer, conscious rather of his fat face and unconvinced pomposity than of the excellence of his family connections. She remembered the giving of the cross and its display by the delighted Charlotte in the joint bedroom where the girls then slept. Later—and this she remembered still more vividly—the creature had left Fleddon and his lady-love, and was not seen or heard of more. She had cried out against him for an unmanly wretch, but had been chid by Charlotte, sadly patient. "We can never judge another's motives, darling," Charlotte had said. "But he had *asked* you, Lottie, had he not?" To which insistent questioning Charlotte had never made response, while the younger girl had grieved for many days that she was thus excluded from a sister's confidence.

Now, in the unlucky moment of Catherine's own imminent confession, the light glinting from poor Charlotte's "cross of memory" (she wore it once a year, more proud to be unmaidenly than he had been ashamed of his unmanliness) flickered across her eyes and roused the past from sleep. "*She* would not tell me once . . ."

Crisply she answered:

"'Pretend'? Indeed, Lottie, I am no actress! I haven't the least idea what you are hinting at."

The bright love faded from the other's eyes; her face set into the hard lines that came more easily now than a few years ago.

"Very well, dear," she said, rising. "It must be as you please. But some day you will be sorry you did not trust me. I am going in now. There are notices to be revised for the concert at the Institute."

She gathered her work from the garden table and walked quickly to the house.

Pity poor Charlotte!

II

What then had Charlotte seen? How much indeed did Charlotte know?

In all the agony of doubt (and the more agonised for knowing she had wronged her sister and herself) Catherine Ormond sat and stared across the trim lawn to where tall clustered roses flanked the grassy path to the old sun-dial. At least, if she had told the truth, she would have known the truth! But now she knew not whether Charlotte only guessed or whether she had certain proof. Of what?

There was only one incident she could have witnessed. Or was there? Might she not, unperceived, have seen that moment of delight—or that—or that? Or was it only Charlotte that had seen? Were others talking—talking of *her*, Catherine Ormond, as they talked of Winnie Dysart at the Ball and Cross? She shuddered. It was horrible!

But the next instant hope overcame foreboding. She was absurd and panic-foolish. No one but Charlotte knew anything; and Charlotte only the trifling sight that she had seen, only that fleeting touch of hands . . .

And forthwith hope in turn gave place to sweeter memory. Catherine, against the dim curtain of the gathering dusk, saw for the fiftieth time the scenes of wonder that composed her secret drama.

She saw the gloom of the steep gravel drive that swept down from Fleddon Park to Ormond Gate. Tall hedges of box and yew closed in this sombre road, and from behind the hedges rose beech trees, waving naked arms in the sullen tumult of a windy March. Grey clouds raced overhead, skimming the tortured trees. The deep trench of the drive between its dark steep hedges was like a long cold box, with tilted muddy floor and close-clipped walls and a grey, shifting, angry lid.

She saw herself, muffled in cloak and shawl, come hurrying down this cheerless way. Beside her leapt her little spaniel Rex, joyous and golden brown for all the wildness of the weather. They reached the last turn of the drive, beyond which the tunnelled gateway gave final access to the town. Clattering hoofs, a thunderous echo from the vaulted arch, the heavy screech of wheels on muddy gravel—and with a crack of whip her brother Felix swung round the curve, driving tandem in his smart high dog-cart.

She crouched against the hedge, her hands raised to her throat to stay the cry that struggled there. Her little dog, a moment earlier in happy frolic some few yards before his mistress' eyes, was down among the plunging hoofs. He rolled and scrambled desperately. Poor Catherine moved to pluck him from the scrimmage, when Felix shouted, reined his horses to their haunches and brought the whole equipage to panting halt.

The bundle of brown hair seemed to lie motionless. But slowly, painfully, it raised its head and began dragging horribly towards the hedge.

"His legs are broken!" wailed the distracted girl. "Oh, Felix, you have killed my Rex!"

She bent to the poor tortured dog, and her tears rained upon his patient agony.

Her brother, on his high box-seat, looked guilty and absurd. The horses shifted recklessly. He dared not loose the reins nor try to clamber down to Catherine's help.

"I'm devilish sorry, Kate," he shouted. "I can't leave these brutes. I'll drive them on to the stables and come back. Keep the little fellow there till I send Potter down to you."

But she made no sign of hearing what he said, only bent closer over Rex and wept more bitterly.

Hardly had Felix set his dog-cart again in motion, when she was conscious of a figure at her side.

"May I see the little dog, Miss Ormond? I am a veterinary surgeon, and may be able to relieve him."

She looked up, and blue eyes met hers, eyes that were strong and masculine, but soft with pity for her mangled pet.

"Oh, if you *can!*" she cried. "Is he dying? Save him for me!"

The young man did not answer, but stooped at once to where Rex lay, half in his mistress' arms, half on the muddy ground. Seeing a stranger, he growled feebly and made as if to snap.

"He does not like any one to touch him but me," she said with a pathetic little smile. "Be careful. He may bite you."

"No, he will not do that; will you, old man? There—let me see; now this way a little—that's better——"

Was there a magic in the long deft fingers that so gently felt the mangled limbs? No sooner had this stranger touched the dog, than the poor beast—a moment earlier snarling with pain and fear—lay quiet and silent. The young doctor never raised his eyes from the examination. Catherine, marvelling the more each second at his power over her little friend, glanced curiously at his face and figure. He was tall and muscular; crouched easily beside her on the drive; and, as she watched the lean grave face, with its firm chin and thin determined mouth, she told herself that he was more than handsome, for he was kind as well, and strong.

"The back legs are crushed," he said suddenly. "But not, I hope, broken. If you would allow me—my surgery is close by——?"

Catherine felt a fierce confidence in this young stranger that drove every other consideration from her head.

"*Please, please!*" she cried. "You are wonderful with him! Let us go at once!"

He gathered the spaniel tenderly in his arms. The little dog gave a short cry, as he was lifted from the ground; then lay limp and still again, his brown eyes fixed unwinkingly upon his rescuer's face.

"I am afraid," began the stranger diffidently, "that I—in fact, that I have the advantage of you. You see, everybody knows Miss Catherine Ormond . . ."

They were moving down the drive toward

the gateway. Catherine, heedless of muddy stains on cloak and skirt, was about to wave impatiently aside all notions of formality, when steps and voices calling made her turn. Felix and a groom were hurrying after them.

"Where are you going? Where's the dog?" Then as his glance fell on the stranger and his burden—"Who is this? Catherine, please explain."

Felix Ormond had a bad-tempered way with him at any time. Now that he found his sister with an unknown man, and that this unknown man was carrying off the cause of all the pother in his arms, he spoke peremptorily and with peevish insolence.

"This gentleman was kind enough to look at Rex. He is an animal's surgeon. I'm afraid I do not know his name——"

Young Ormond looked the stranger up and down.

"A vet, are you?" he demanded rudely. "Don't know your face. D'you live here?"

"My name is Martindale, Mr. Ormond," said the other quietly. "I am the son of Thomas Martindale who died last year. I am continuing his practice."

"You seem a sharp fellow at picking up new customers," sneered Felix. "My father employs Greensmith, I'm afraid. Perhaps it would be contrary to etiquette to ask you to carry the dog round to your rival's place?"

Catherine broke in, her face aflame with anger and embarrassment:

"Oh Felix! How can you be so rude? Mr. Martindale has been wonderful with Rex, and I won't allow any one else to touch him."

Frank Martindale smiled gratefully and spoke again in his low courteous voice.

"Thank you, Miss Ormond, for what you say. But of course if Mr. Ormond wishes the case entrusted to Mr. Greensmith, I have no ground for objection. I would only urge that no time be lost. The little dog needs immediate care."

She turned and began walking once more toward the gate. After a few steps she paused and beckoned Martindale to follow.

"Please come quickly, Mr. Martindale." Then to her brother: "I am sorry to displease you, Felix, but the dog is mine, and I take him to any doctor I please."

The opening scene of Catherine's dream-play was already at an end. The last words spoken to Frank Martindale and to her angry brother were as clear to her as though they had been spoken yesterday; but thereafter she retained brief fleeting visions only of the immediate outcome of that momentous afternoon. These flashed confusedly before the eyes of memory—Martindale with his small patient in the humble surgery in Sheep Street;

Felix at dinner, sullen, careful to avoid all reference to the accident; her mother full of anxious sympathy; Charlotte distressed for Rex, but curious for details of his saviour . . .

The scene was played. With one last, longing thought of Frank as she had then first seen him in this world, Catherine lay quiet and let the next phase of her love-story loom from the mists, take shape before her eyes.

This time she saw the long deep valley of the Glaive, through which ran side by side the gurgling river and the broad still canal. Fleddon town was round the corner and out of sight. She saw the wooded precipice that fell from Fleddon Park to the rich meadows of the valley-bottom; she saw the winter raiment of the trees—dark purple-brown with patches of some weary evergreen—already broidered with the spring's new loveliness; she saw reflected in the quiet canal a sky of tattered blue and sudden bulging clouds.

Along the towpath in a white dress, that very day brought rashly out to greet the fickle sunshine, Catherine saw Catherine Ormond walk. She was three miles or more from home; the sun still fought a losing battle with the clouds, but every moment threat of rain grew stronger. A hundred yards ahead a low brick bridge spanned the canal and carried a rough cart-track from one side the valley to the other. Toward the bridge went Catherine; beneath its mossy arch took timely shelter. She had not long to wait. Big rain drops thudded on the trodden earth to left of her; big drops fell plopping in the sluggish water to her right. The steep woods stirred and rustled as the rain came heavily, flecking a million leaves.

The minutes passed. It was a gloomy refuge, the dank brick vaulting of the little bridge, and none too comfortable, for the arch sprang from low beside the path, and full-grown persons might not stand their height save at the very brink of the canal. Catherine tried crouching by the wall, but her neck ached with bending and she moved toward the water's edge. There she was cold; for with the April rain had come a gusty wind that curled beneath the bridge and at her back and chilled her, being lightly clad.

The rain fell steadily. Peering from under the coping of the bridge, she scanned the sky and found it spread with watery grey. Against the wall of woods the long slant of the rain seemed to descend from unimaginable heights; the trees had exchanged their eager whispering for a contented rhythmic purr. "Oh, dear!" thought Catherine; "I'm here for hours!"

The sound of horse's hoofs along the cart-track at her back caught her attention. Curiosity, sharpened by the dull solitude of her dismal waiting, prompted her to peep out and risk a wetting for her bonnet. She saw Frank Martindale, who slowly toward the little bridge came riding. " Some one to talk to ! " Was that Catherine's thought—or one more personal ? She waved and called to him, and he was off his horse and by her side, and rain and neckaches were forgotten.

" You have no cloak, Miss Ormond ? How very rash ! "

" It was lovely when I left home," she pouted. " But I was silly to put on this dress. I might have known that June clothes run a risk in April."

" It is a pretty dress," he said reflectively ; " or seems so, when you wear it."

" The charm has been sadly wasted ! " she laughed. " I've been under this horrid bridge for twenty minutes, and one old water rat is the only living thing that did me homage."

" The water rat and I," he smiled. " Two lucky ones."

She looked away, conscious of sudden quailing before his friendly eyes.

" I mustn't keep you here, Mr. Martindale," she said hastily. " The arch is too low for *me*, so it must be agony for *you* to stand bunched up like that. The rain won't go on for ever. You are expected somewhere, I am sure ? "

He ignored most of her words, fastening only on the hinted discomfort that she had undergone.

"Wait a moment; I will get you a seat," he said, and left her.

Directly he was back again, carrying the saddle from his horse. With this and the rough coat he wore he made a stool, placed it against the brickwork of the bridge, and bade her sit.

"Now lean back against my jacket. There—how is that?"

She threw a grateful glance, which lit unconsciously to one of admiration at his tall figure in its shirt sleeves, but was forthwith extinguished in a rush of shyness. To hide the blush that would not be kept down, she dropped her head and waited awkwardly. Frank spoke:

"My friend Rex is as nearly all right again as he can hope to be, I think. His doctor need not visit him again."

The first words, with their easy conversational cheerfulness, restored Catherine from her embarrassment. But in the last sentence she detected a note of meaning and regret, which set her fluttering once again.

"Oh yes," she faltered, "he is doing splendidly. But I think—I mean, it would please me—please him—be good for him—I mean, is it *quite certain* he won't strain himself—strain himself or something?"

"Nothing of the kind can be *quite* certain, Miss Ormond. But I do not want to force my services on you, especially as I am not your family adviser."

"You are Rex's adviser," she said with sudden spirit, "and must remain so."

There was a pause. Frank Martindale was tapping his whip against his leggings; Catherine played absently with the loose end of the stirrup-leather.

"While I remember," she began, a little awkwardly, "if it is not very dreadful to speak of these things—will you please let *me* know what is owing for Rex. He is *my* dog, you see."

The last words were pathetic in their blend of pride and deprecation. He understood that she was trying at once to save him pain and to give emphasis to her own independent right of management.

"There is nothing owing, Miss Ormond," he said softly.

"Nothing? Oh, but there must be! You have been—three, or four—it must be *five*—times since he came back—and all you did at first——"

In her agitation she had raised her face to his. He shook his head and smiled gravely.

"No. Nothing at all. Really. It has been a pleasure to help——" seeing her clear gaze falter, he concluded rapidly—"such a jolly little dog."

Catherine sat with head more bowed than ever. Her fingers twisted feverishly about the stirrup-leather.

"It is very kind," she murmured. "But I

do not like to think of your spending skill and time for nothing, when both are valuable."

"As a favour to me, Miss Ormond," he begged. "I ask you to allow me this very real pleasure. I love animals, you know. They are friends to me. And I have got fond of your little dog."

"Not more so than he of you," she responded. "I am quite jealous of your power over him. Do all beasts let you do what you like with them?"

He laughed.

"Mostly, I think. But there is nothing marvellous in it. Ever since I was a tiny boy I have had to do with animals, and one gets to know their ways and how to manage them."

"Your father was a—an animal doctor—too?" (Ever since Felix had behaved so rudely on the drive, she had felt there was some insult in the title "vet.")

Frank nodded.

"And his father before him," he added. "But not here; in Cheshire. My father only came to the south-west two years before he died."

Without warning he sat himself on the ground beside the girl. The rain fell steadily. At times the wooded hills were almost lost behind the curtain of streaming grey. They seemed the only human creatures in a world of falling rain. If the wind still blew coldly, neither knew of it; and whether rats or waterfowl moved in the reedy mere beyond the sluice, they noticed not, nor cared.

" I was an only son," said Martindale, of a sudden reminiscent, " and as a little chap would go out with my father round the Cheshire farms. I must have ridden many a hundred miles on the back seat of his trap. I hardly ever sat in front. He liked to pick up cronies as he drove, and have them at his side a mile or two. So I was perched behind on a seat so narrow that I wonder, looking back at it, I managed to stay on at all. To this day I can revive in my head the queer dizziness of seeing the road slide away from under me, and the hedges flit by on either side with a strange headachy movement as they drew together in the distance. I remember another funny detail. In the extreme distance the motion of the trees would be reversed and it would seem that all about me was gliding away—but that far-off something was trying to come after us, trying to move forward faster than the rest of Nature was hurrying backwards, trying to catch the trap and seize the little boy that perched precariously on the swaying narrow ledge of the back seat. I would dream of it sometimes——"

He broke off with an embarrassed laugh.

" Forgive me, Miss Ormond. I go talking on. . . ."

She had been sitting spellbound by his voice, picturing to herself the quaint figure of the child clinging to a swaying trap, shrinking from an imaginary hedgerow-ogre that strove in the far distance to come nearer, nearer. . . . When he broke off, she started; became confused; and in her shyness said the one thing she longed more than all else to leave unsaid.

"Look! It is clearing."

He sprang to his feet, hiding the disappointment that her words had caused. Then chid himself for presuming to be sad. Why should a Catherine Ormond care for details of a poor vet's childhood? Why indeed? He knew no reason other than that it pleased the vet to tell her them. The cursed sky was half an arch of blue already. The rain had ceased; only the busy drip-drip of the trees and here and there a gleaming puddle on the path told of the passing storm.

"Yes," he said. "It is over. I think you will get home dry, after all."

Catherine had, during the last few moments, gone through a purgatory of shame and self-contempt. What evil spirit had prompted her to break the spell; to interrupt her happiness; to give her companion the pain that, for all his care to cloak it from her, she knew too well that he had suffered? Pity for him or anger at her own gaucherie conquered her shyness.

"I wish it were still raining," she said simply. "I want to hear more about your drives and how you became a friend to animals."

This time it was he who flushed. Stooping to pick up his saddle, he walked off with it to where his horse was tethered. When he rejoined her, his eyes were bright and eager.

"Do you often come this way, Miss Ormond?"

In a flash she made up her mind.

"Yes," she replied. "It is my favourite walk."

"Then perhaps I may be fortunate enough to meet you again some day. Good-day, Miss Ormond. If there is anything I can do for Rex, you will be kind enough to let me know?"

He bowed gravely. She bent her head, then stretched out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Martindale, and thank you very, very much for your kindness to Rex—and to me."

For an instant before she turned and left him their eyes met. To Catherine in retrospect, that instant was the lovely flowering of the whole hour of talk. She sighed happily in her garden chair and let the next scene take its course.

It opened grimly. Once more she wandered on the towing path, watching for Frank as she had come, those recent weeks, to watch for him. There had been many meetings since that April shower had turned a low brick archway into a paradise. At first they had been meetings of deliberate chance; but gradually one stolen hour of talk had come to end with an appointment for the next. To-day she knew that he would come—and when, and whence—but none the less her heart gave a great leap of joy to see him striding down the lane, to wave his greeting back to him, to know that for a while at least, was happiness.

The spaniel Rex, as quick to recognise a friend's approach as Catherine a lover's, dashed barking to Frank's side, and stood on his now restored back legs and whimpered his delight and smeared his doctor's leggings with urgent sand-clogged paws. Frank stopped to fondle, but Catherine from a little distance knew the gesture for perfunctory and noticed, as he came toward her, that he was grave and sad. He raised his hat and asked her how she did; then paced beside her in a cloud of silence. At last:

"Miss Ormond," he said determinedly, "I am going away."

She did not understand. Fancying he had some journey to make, and grieved to miss their meetings for that little while, she answered lightly:

"Well, you will not be gone for ever. Is it a long way?"

"I am going to leave Fleddon—and not come back again."

She swerved a pace away from him.

"Leave Fleddon?" she gasped. "Oh, why——?"

"Because it is better," he replied.

"But your work!" she cried, fighting the realisation of his meaning that forced itself upon her. "What will become of your work? You cannot throw away a practice. It takes years to win success in a fresh place."

"Better that than bring trouble on others."

"Does it bring no trouble on others, your going away like this? What of the farmers who rely on you? What of the beasts you have cared for and who love you? Will they not suffer?"

He jerked his head, and she was conscious that he squared his shoulders to uphold some difficult decision.

"I cannot help it," he said at last. "I must harm my patients rather than——" Breaking off, he stood and looked at her steadily for a moment. Then: "I have come to bid you good-bye, Miss Ormond. We shall probably never meet again."

She leant against the low broken wall that divided the tow-path from a flowery meadow. Her hands went to her throat, with the gesture so pitifully her own.

"Never—meet——" she stammered. With a struggle she steadied her reeling senses. "You say you must harm your patients rather than—what? Rather than—whom? . . ."

He half ſtretched out his arms, fiſts clenched, as though to beg for her indulgence.

"Don't make it harder! Don't ask me to say what should not be said! Let me go—only let me go—and miss me a little when I am gone!"

Now was she certain. Now, with that ſtrange serenity that comes to a woman confident of love as yet unspoken, she smiled gently on him, and laid a soft hand lightly on his sleeve.

"You muſt tell me," she insiſted. "I demand it."

He caught her hand and kissed it passionately; flung it down; half turned to leave her; swung again; looked into her shining eyes; then caught her to his breaſt.

That day they had no thought for plans or future risks. Their hour went by in murmured happiness. "Oh, Catherine, dearest Catherine, that you should love me!"—"Frank, Frank! I think I loved you centuries ago; I'm sure I loved you when you were a tiny boy and drove about the Cheshire lanes; I was the spirit of the hedge that tried to catch you—I have caught you now, Frank, haven't I?"

Then would come kisses and the lovely touch of hand on hand . . .

Wisdom and grave discussion followed more soberly when next they met.

"I am afraid for you, my own," he said. "Sir Harry will not welcome me. You should have let me go. They will prevent our marrying."

She tossed her little head.

"Papa will come to see that when I mean to have my way, I have it. Besides, a girl cannot be forced to marry against her will; nor can she be stopped, if she has made up her mind. And my mind is dreadfully made up, sir, so I warn you! You can't be free of your Catherine now!"

He squeezed her arm and murmured loving words. Then tried another line of insincere discouragement.

"I am a poor man, sweetheart. You would have work to do and halfpennies to count, if you were Mrs. Martindale."

She laughed delightedly.

"Say it again Frank! Say 'Mrs. Martindale' again! How splendid it sounds! So grave and managing! We will have a sweet little cottage over there by Boulter's Wood, and a long shed in the garden where the sick animals will be, and I shall go about in a lovely white apron and get their food and your food, and mamma will come and see us, and Charlotte and—oh, won't it be heaven? And we'll spend the evenings counting the halfpennies and putting a few more every night into the old teapot——"

Against his better judgment, in the face of his very genuine foreboding, he let her chatter on, and laughed with her and loved her each moment more amazingly and kissed her every now and then.

Another day he made a further try for common sense.

"I must see your father, Catherine. It is not fit that you should meet your lover in the fields like any village girl. And I am apprehensive. He will not like it; he will probably be very angry; and then you may suffer."

"Oh, Frank, Frank! When will you learn that I am not a child? I will manage papa. I will tell him everything to-night, and be so sweet to him that he will consent to all we want. Then you can come, and he will shake your hand and mamma will cry over you and we shall fix the day for the wedding immediately."

He smiled, a little sadly.

"God bless you for your courage, darling. May it turn out as you say. I fear, however, that your brother will not be so kind, even if you *can* twist Sir Harry round that delicious little finger."

At thought of Felix she tossed her head again.

"Felix can say what he likes," she said proudly. "He is not so perfect himself that he can afford to dictate perfection to his sisters. All the same——" and her pretty indignation gave place to a gurgle of delight—

"I owe him the first sight of you, don't I, Frank? If he hadn't run over poor Rex, and you hadn't been speaking to old Walters at the lodge and heard me cry out and come quickly up the drive—well, all kinds of things might never have happened! I can remind him of that, if he is unpleasant, can't I? Tell him it's all his own fault . . ."

They parted; she a-bubble with excited happiness; he half intoxicated with her lovely merriment, half woefully uneasy for the future of their honey-sweet romance.

Over Catherine's dreaming eyes a shadow brooded. She had re-lived the golden days of her love-history; those yet to come were sombre with the threat of sorrow and dispute.

She saw herself at dinner on the day late in July when she had planned to break the news to old Sir Harry, when she had promised Frank to wheedle a stern father to compliance. Throughout the meal she had been ill at ease, framing the sentences that should win over her papa, rejecting them and framing others. She would waylay him as he left the dining-room after his wine; would drag him to the library and tell her story there, while Lady Ormond and Charlotte sat in the drawing-room wondering why Sir Harry did not come and whither Catherine had fled. Then they would go together to her mother, and she and

Charlotte would be first surprised, then happy in their Catherine's happiness. Felix was not at home, and she was glad of it. Sir Harry was always better-tempered in his son's absence, as indeed were they all.

But her careful scheming went for nothing. No sooner had the three ladies risen to leave the dining-room, than old Sir Harry called his younger daughter.

" Stay here a moment, Catherine. I have something to say to you."

The door closed behind Charlotte and her mother. Catherine felt trapped and isolated from her kind. Her heart beat wildly. Was it possible that Sir Harry knew already ? Had some one spied and told ? Breathless with fear, she sat and waited for her father to begin. His first words sent her dizzy with relief, but those that followed quickly sobered her.

" You know Mr. Crossley, Catherine ? "

She nodded.

" I know whom you mean, papa."

" But you have seen him two or three times ? "

" Yes. I have just met him. Not more than that."

" You liked him ? "

" I hardly noticed him, papa. I did not *dislike* him, that I remember; but I have no clear recollection of him. I doubt if I would know him again if we passed one another in the street."

" He is Lord Lypiatt's heir," said Sir Harry musingly. " It is a good property, and the title is an old one."

" Yes, papa ? "

She was at a loss to understand whither this conversation tended.

" Mr. Crossley is very little over forty," continued Sir Harry. He seemed to argue with himself, justifying some point of view of which the girl knew nothing. Uncomprehending, she repeated formally :

" Yes, papa ? "

" You know nothing to his disadvantage, Catherine ? "

The old gentleman turned so suddenly on his daughter, that she started with surprise.

" *I*, papa ? How should *I* know anything to his disadvantage or otherwise ? "

" Quite so, quite so," mumbled the father, and sat in silence for a while, drumming his fingers on the table cloth. At last, timidly, Catherine ventured :

" You wished to say something to me, papa ? "

Sir Harry raised his head and looked at her from under shaggy eyebrows. Then he cleared his throat :

" The fact is, my dear, that Mr. Crossley has asked my leave to pay his addresses to you."

" To *me ?* " Catherine was incredulous. " Oh, papa, is this a cruel joke ? "

" A joke ? " snapped the old gentleman.

"Certainly not. I am not in the habit of joking with my daughters. Surely I spoke clearly enough? Mr. Crossley wishes to marry you, and has asked my permission to address you. Good gracious, girl!" Seeing the stupefied dismay with which his daughter was regarding him: "Are you moonstruck? Is there anything so very remarkable in the proceeding?"

"But, papa," stammered poor Catherine. "I do not know Mr. Crossley—nor he me. It must be a mistake. He cannot want to marry *me!*"

"Well, my dear, he certainly said he did—told me this morning. I suppose he knows his own mind. I told him I would prepare you for his visit. It will not be immediately. He has to be in London for a few weeks. But you can think it over. If, as I hope, your father's wishes have weight with you, you will bear in mind that I approve the match proposed. I think you are a very lucky girl."

"Papa, dear papa!" She ran to him and put her arms about his neck. "I cannot marry Mr. Crossley; indeed, I cannot! You will tell him that it is no use, will you not? It is very kind of him to do me the honour, but anything of the sort is quite impossible. I——"

Sir Harry rose abruptly, shaking off his daughter's pleading arms. He suspected nothing in her urgency but some trifling whimsy of a startled girl. He never thought to ask her reasons for so definite a rejection of the proffered suitor.

"Do not be foolish, Catherine!" he said a little gruffly, "I have told you to think the matter over. From a dutiful daughter I shall expect obedience. You behave as though you were being forced on a man you did not like, whereas you are merely asked to consider a compliment paid you by a person of position, to whom, by your confession, you have no objection at all. Now let us go to the drawing-room. I have no more to say."

Situations in retrospect often become easier of domination, more susceptible of triumphant mastery, than they were in fact. But Catherine, thinking of this interview with old Sir Harry as she had thought of it a dozen times before, was as unable now as then to see escape from fortune's checkmate. She had stood speechless before the trick that chance had played her and knew, were the whole incident to be repeated, she must stand speechless still. She could not breathe Frank's name; no hazard could more utterly have stopped her mouth, than that which, at *this* moment of all moments, threw in her teeth the foolish fancy of Lord Lypiatt's heir. She had stood speechless; had followed old Sir Harry from the room; but at the drawing-room door had turned and run upstairs, and in her bedroom's solitude had faced the riddle of the future.

There Lady Ormond found her, seated beside the open window, a candle on the small table at her side, bent over her writing-desk and writing steadily.

The mother stood a moment unobserved in the shadowy embrasure by the door. The summer night had fallen soft and windless. The candle flame rose straight into the air, shedding a faint warmish glow on the dark curling hair and smooth pale cheek of Catherine engrossed. The mother's heart was sorrowful; she guessed—or thought she guessed—her daughter's agitation and distress.

" Catherine dear ! " she cried in a low voice. " Catherine, are you unwell ? "

The girl was roused from her absorption. Pen in air, she peered into the darkness.

" Is it you, mamma ? No. I am quite well. Only a little tired. And as I had a letter—letters—to write, I came upstairs to get them done and go to bed."

Lady Ormond crossed the room and seated herself on a low chair at her daughter's side. The writing-desk snapped to as she approached and was laid on the window seat, where its pearl inlay and pale painted roses glimmered ghostly in the uncertain light.

" My dear," began the mother, " I am

afraid your father has been a little sudden with you——"

Catherine thought rapidly. Should she confess all to her mother? An aching need to throw herself on that consoling comfortable breast racked her unhappy spirit. Then she recalled the letter to her Frank that lay half written in her desk. *He* must be first told of the terrible mischance that had befallen her. *He* would advise. Until she knew his wishes she must keep silence.

Guilefully (but, notwithstanding, bringing conviction to her mother's mistaken reading of the case) she acted on the hint of Lady Ormond's words.

"Sudden, mamma? Yes, it was sudden. But it was not that so much that startled me. I do not want to leave you, mamma—you and Charlotte. I do not want to marry any one just yet. This——"

"Listen, Catherine. Your father, in his wish to do as Mr. Crossley asked him, has perhaps given too precise a form to what is only a suggestion. You must not think, my dear, that you will be hurried into any marriage. If, when you know Mr. Crossley better, you are decided that, as his wife, you would not be happy, I shall be content for him to go his ways. I do not wish my daughters to be other than happy wives. You believe that, do you not, Catherine?"

"Dear mamma, of course I do. But this

idea of Mr. Crossley's is so meaningless. Why *me*, mamma? How can he possibly want a girl he does not know?"

"Gentlemen are often more observant than we think, my dear. Whereas you remember nothing of Mr. Crossley but a few casual greetings, he has perhaps noticed more. He is a serious man and would not determine lightly such a serious matter as a choice of bride."

Catherine sat silent, wondering how best to play for time and to preserve her precious secret. At last:

"When—how soon do you think—when is he coming—to inspect me?"

"Hush, dear! You must not let yourself be bitter. There is no question of inspection. Mr. Crossley has made up his mind. When he comes, it will be to invite you to make up yours."

The girl turned and clung with sudden urgency to her mother's arm.

"Mamma, keep him away! I do not want to see him! I do not want to marry him! *You* do not want me to marry him, mamma; not *really?*"

"I want my Catherine to be happy," replied Lady Ormond primly, "but I also want her to be sensible. Come, my dear; do not give way to exaggerated feelings. You owe it to your father—and to me—to give at least consideration to things that we propose."

Chilled by her mother's manner, Catherine drew back. Her pride was roused. They were intent on putting Mr. Crossley to the test. Well; let him come. She would pretend consideration, and then show the force of her decision when he began his hateful overtures. Submissively she answered Lady Ormond's mild rebuke:

"I beg your pardon, mamma. I did not intend to be theatrical. Do you know when Mr. Crossley will be here? I must prepare my mind for his arrival."

The mother was warmly reassured by Catherine's dutiful reply; she rose and kissed her daughter affectionately.

"That is my Catherine!" she said. "Remember—there is no compulsion, no thought of compulsion. Mr. Crossley hopes to be here in September. You have plenty of time for thought. Now, you will not worry yourself any more, will you? Quite happy again? Good-night, my dear; sleep well."

"Oh yes, mamma; quite happy now. Good-night!"

Three weeks of August heat taught Catherine the vast consequence of her decision to withhold, even from Lady Ormond, the true reason of her dread of Mr. Crossley and his courtship. She had from Frank a verbal answer to her letter of appeal. He had no fresh suggestion; merely reiterated that he must see Sir Harry.

This, because she had let pass the chance of winning her mother to her side, Catherine implored him not to do.

"Not yet, Frank. I beg of you not yet! They will send me away. They will prevent our meetings. My only happiness lies in these meetings. You would not be so cruel as to put an end to them? Promise me, Frank!"

At first he reasoned kindly with her passionate love of him. The only honourable thing a man can do, he said, is to declare his love before the world. He felt each time he stole an hour with Catherine in the fields, that he was putting insult on her.

She laughed at this, and asked him if an insult could give pleasure so delicious that she had need of more and ever more of the same kind.

He changed his argument. Suppose that some intimate of Catherine's saw them wander side by side in a secluded spot? What then? Would she not suffer far more at her angry father's hands than if he, Frank, went now and made his claim of her, and bore the brunt of Ormond's outraged dignity?

She only clung to him and murmured loving words and sent his senses reeling with her kisses; then prayed him, as he loved her, to let matters drift a little longer, to leave her just a week more happiness—or two weeks—or a month . . .

And so from day to day, against the promptings of his honour and of common sense, he yielded and was soft with her and drugged his conscience with the sweet heady perfume of her love.

Until a day when the event foretold came suddenly to pass.

They had, with the unconscious elaboration of a deceit daily more intricate, acquired the habit of altering from time to time their meeting place. This blazing afternoon, in search of freshness, they had appointed a rendezvous at a small quarry on the steep hillside beyond Enderly, a pretty village lying south-west of Fleddon. There, under the shelter of an overhanging cliff, they sat and talked their problem round about, and breathed their lovers' nonsense. Rising to part, they walked, hand clasped in hand, toward the rutted track that through a little wood gave access from the quarry to the lane below. The change of place brought them beyond the protecting shadow of the cliff into full view of the rising hill above. They did not think that straight across that hill ran the broad turnpike from Fleddon Cross to Sawley. They were about to draw together for the parting kiss, when, through the drowsiness of mutual absorption, struck and roused them both the sound of wheels. Hands were released; they sprang to shelter of the trees; then turned and scanned the treacherous forgotten road. The Ormond carriage rolled majestically across the hill and in it Charlotte sat, and leant toward their hiding place, and seemed to stare and stare . . .

Catherine could never think of that appalling moment except she shivered at its terrors. She shivered now, half waking from her trance. The wicker of her basket chair creaked noisily and brought her nearer to complete awakening. The dusk was fallen quite. Long shadows lurked about the lawn and shrubs. She stretched and rubbed her eyes; then heard a voice call "Catherine! Catherine!"

Stumbling to her feet, she saw her sister walking rapidly toward her from the house.

"Catherine, what *have* you been doing? It is late. Come quickly and dress! Felix has arrived suddenly, bringing Mr. Crossley and his brother, Captain Crossley, with him!"

CHAPTER THREE

I

THE tall dining-room was at once sombre and forlorn. Fleddon Park, in conception Palladian, in fact achieved only spaciousness ; for the eighteenth century Ormond who devised it had cheated his architect's magnificence of its essential weight of ornament, and sought economy too soon for splendour and too late for comfort.

Sir Harry's father had not bettered matters. His hasty bombast, that had blotched Fleddon market-place with Ormond gates, had in a less degree spattered itself about the vast wall-spaces of his house. Enormous mirrors in frames of glass and gold multiplied vistas of emptiness ; from pillared entrances (that had at least naked dignity) dark curtains hung, promising access to rooms of carpeted profusion, which, when the drapery was thrust aside, showed bleak and chill.

The dining-room the late Sir Felix had upholstered in deep red and hung red curtains to its wide high windows. Over the mantelpiece (a rounded emphasis in veined black marble) rose a great looking-glass ; along the walls were hung dark pictures in expensive frames; between the pictures antlered stags projected from carved shields of oak; two sofas, four armchairs, a dozen table chairs or more, two sideboards, and much incidental furniture were set along the walls or in the spaces left by the long dining-table.

And yet the room was under-filled. Sir Harry saw no fault in it, being content to thunder politics down the ancestral dining-room and from the chair that had enthroned one Felix, and should enthrone (in God's good time and Ormond's) a second Felix and his son. But Lady Ormond sighed a little over the baffling emptiness of her home. Drawing-rooms and morning-room and boudoir could be tricked with flounces and flowered carpets and elegant what-nots with fronts of pleated silk into a semblance of dainty gaiety, but the hall, the billiard-room, the library, the smoking-room, the stairs, the landings and, above all, the dining-room defied embellishment.

This evening the light of candles, reflected on damask and on silver, made of the shortened dinner table a quiet pool such as in a dark wood catches the fading glory of the sky and and desolately shines. The gas above the side-board table had been lowered; that to right and left of the chimney breast extinguished altogether. The ladies were as if poised for flight. Catherine, a little breathless with the relief of dinner safely past and with the menace of the evening still to meet, counted the seconds to her mother's rising. Opposite to her sat Philip Crossley, prim and upright in his chair. His face was pale and flat, but queerly angular in outline. The whole effect of him was one of crookedness—not of deformity, but of that subtler lack of balance that comes of a thrawn temper or of slouching carriage. His shoulders, beyond doubt, were asymmetrical; it seemed the sharp lines of the jaw were likewise out of harmony. His manners, in the short time she had had to notice them, were calm, but finely finished and controlled. He treated Catherine with neither more nor less of ceremony than her mother and her sister. His greeting had been so unembarrassed as to be almost distant. At dinner he had talked with quiet gravity, turning his indifferent eyes on all alike, smiling a little now and then in an amusement too polite to be much felt. Catherine began to ask herself whether she had not dreamt her father's threat. This could be no lover come to win a girl that his own fancy had picked out. Or if it were, at least (she thought) he would not greatly grieve at his dismissal.

The younger brother was a different and a more familiar type. Catherine had neighboured him at table and found him easy mannered and amusing. He had gay eyes and a fine brown moustache, and chattered easily of town and country life. Did he know, wondered Catherine, the purpose of their visit? Certainly he paid her marked attention. The fact disquieted. Maybe Sir Harry had confused the brothers. Suppose this Captain Crossley were the suitor? He would be harder to refuse; almost she trembled, picturing his genial face stricken to sudden disappointment. Then from her trembling passed to soundless mirth at thought of old Sir Harry's rage should she, obedient to his own mistaken bidding, accept a younger son. But forthwith chid herself. The very thought of an acceptance was a treachery to Frank. His loved name and the tall figure and the grave tender face she lived to serve glowed in her heart and set her cheeks aflame. Lady Ormond rose. Behind her and behind kind Aunt Letty's spreading skirts, Catherine floated dreaming from the room.

The ladies billowed softly into drawing-room chairs.

"Catherine, darling, will you help me wind my silks?" Aunt Letty asked. "I must bring order into chaos before the gentlemen join us."

"They will not stay long, if they come at all!" said Charlotte. "Felix would rather be anywhere but in the drawing-room. I expect they will go and play billiards."

"That, as visitors, Mr. Crossley and his brother could hardly do," replied Aunt Letty primly. "Besides, I am sure the former, at any rate, would wish to make the better acquaintance of his host's charming daughters."

Catherine laughed, and her disgust with Aunt Letitia's playfulness gave edge and shrillness to her merriment.

"He showed little enough anxiety at dinner," she said. "Did he speak to you at all, Lottie? You were next to him. He hardly looked at me, but perhaps you were more fortunate."

Lady Ormond caught the note of bitterness in her daughter's voice. Soothingly she turned the subject.

"I like them both," she said. "It is the first time I have seen the younger brother. He seems a cheerful unaffected person."

"There's room for cheerfulness in the Crossley family," muttered Catherine.

Aunt Letitia clicked a reproving tongue; then milkily:

"You will tangle the silks worse than ever, darling child, if you tug at them so!" She turned to her sister-in-law: "Do you expect these gentlemen to stay a few days, Mary?"

"I do not know yet. Probably it depends——" Lady Ormond checked herself. Catherine's affairs were hardly the concern of Letitia Anstruther, for all that lady's aggressive interest in them—"depends on things at Maull. Lord Lypiatt is a very old man, and his sons would not wish to disappoint him if he were expecting them by a certain day."

"I *long* to see the glasshouses at Maull!"

gushed Aunt Letitia. "I *love* flowers! Frederick says that in a previous life I must have been a flower!" ("A cauliflower, then!" thought Catherine, suddenly vicious; and giggled at her own schoolgirl silliness.) "We go regularly to the Botanical Society Gardens during the season but, of course they cannot be compared to a real country garden. You know, of course, darling"—Mrs. Anstruther turned to Catherine, whose giggle, for all that it was quickly swallowed, had not escaped an ear sensitive to ridicule—"that Mr. Philip Crossley is a *great gardener!* I remember his orchids at the duchess' fete——not *your* duchess, of course, Mary dear, but the Duchess of Glastonbury; one of her sons was in Frederick's department for a while, and although not directly associated with him, Frederick, who is *so* kind to juniors in the Civil Service if they are deserving and promising young men, went out of his way to be kind to him——well, as I was saying, I recall perfectly being at the wonderful fête her grace organised at Glastonbury House, and going about among the *valleys* of flowers—I assure you they were no less!—and stopping short before a bowl of the strangest orchids, such uncanny shapes, that I——"

Aunt Letitia's workbox slipped from her knee to the floor, and the carpet was strewn with reels, thread, pins and scissor-case. Catherine and her sister dived to the rescue.

"Make her stop, Lottie!" whispered Catherine. "I shall scream if she goes on."

But Charlotte was spared the pains of intervention, for, as the workbox was restored to Aunt Letitia's knee and as the lady prepared once more to embark on the wide sea of reminiscence, the door opened and Mr. Crossley, followed by Sir Harry, entered the drawing-room.

Lady Ormond smiled lazily on the new comers.

"What have you done with Captain Crossley and Felix?" she inquired.

"I believe I heard your son suggest billiards," replied Mr. Crossley. "I hope you will excuse my brother his lack of ceremony. Sir Harry and I were engaged in an interesting discussion, and I am afraid I hardly noticed that we had come upstairs unattended."

("Prig!" spluttered Catherine to herself. "Prig! Beast! Fiddle-de-dee!")

Lady Ormond had laughed away her guest's apologies.

"Oh, we are accustomed to Felix's after-dinner manners," she said. "What about was your discussion?"

"Politics," broke in Sir Harry abruptly. He stood astride on the hearthrug, hands under coat tails, his square highly-coloured face glowing with vintage port and prejudices older yet. "Crossley is standing up for Gladstone—the levelling demagogue. I tell him that he'll soon change his tune, if the fellow gets his head. These revolutionary politicians always keep quiet until they have their chance. Wait till he starts confiscating land and setting up every waster and out-of-work on *our* money ! "

The devil of rebellious pertness that had teased Catherine's self-control ever since dinner started took sudden hold upon her brain.

" Oh, papa ! " she cried. " No politics here, I beg ! "

The other ladies held their breath. What storm should now descend ?

But Sir Harry (amazing man !), good-humoured still for all his argument, smiled indulgently.

" Hoity-toity ! Hear that, Crossley ? The child takes me up in my own drawing-room. Now her mother would never have spoken so as a girl, would you Mary ? "

Lady Ormond, still breathless over her daughter's boldness and marvelling at its unexpected reprieve, murmured a vague assent. Meantime, the visitor with his cool quiet eyes was studying Catherine's face. How did he read the flushed cheek, the hint of tremble in the lip ? A queer side-long movement brought him to her side.

" You are not interested in politics, Miss Catherine ? "

She was on edge and, strangely, even a little angry that her challenge to paternal despotism had passed so quietly. The devil whispered: "Try again!"

"I hate them!" she flashed. Then, like a wicked afterthought: "Nearly as much as gardening!"

Crossley allowed his eyebrows to lift ever so slightly. His mouth extended suddenly to either side. It was hardly a smile, rather the prolongation of a thin straight line. He spoke reflectively:

"Gardening and politics—Miss Catherine Ormond's hatreds. An odd pair. Yet they have something in common. Each is a gamble."

Despite herself, she caught the words with interest. She was a child in such a world of ways, this Catherine, for all that she could love clandestinely.

"A gamble? Gardening a gamble? How?"

"If you will come to Maull some day, I will explain. It is not easy to argue in the void. Will you ask Lady Ormond if you may not make an excursion there? It is a pretty drive."

Catherine saw that he had caught her; pouted; then bit her lip. At last, defiantly:

"It would be very pleasant. I am fond of driving, and Charlotte adores flowers!"

At that he threw his head back and (a distant onlooker might have said) laughed loudly; but, if he laughed, he did so soundlessly, and Catherine, whose eyes were bent over her work, nor saw the movement nor suspected merriment. When next in his direction and from under lowered lids she ventured a quick glance, he had left her and was seated by Lady Ormond on the sofa.

II

In the billiard-room Felix Ormond thrust his cue angrily into its place in the tall stand.

"Devilish unlucky fellow I am!" he grumbled, and tossed a five-pound note on to the table. It lay there, crisply crumpled, in the strong hot glare of the green-shaded lights. Hugh Crossley, smiling a little under his thick moustache, picked it up and smoothed it thoughtfully between his fingers.

"Thanks," he said nonchalantly. "But I suspect it was as much good manners as bad luck. They say a host should always lose."

Tact did its work. Felix, already ashamed of his bad temper, snatched the opportunity of reinstatement, even if only in his own esteem.

"What about a drink?"

Over their brandy and water they spoke of Newmarket and Tattersall's and the London season that had lately closed.

"This Mrs. Anstruther?" asked Crossley. "Is she the wife of Frederick Anstruther, the government fellow?"

Felix nodded.

"Eaton Square," he said. "She is a sister of the governor's. Don't care for her myself; too much sail on altogether. Besides, she prys into my affairs in town. I ain't anxious for a second mother."

"But she spoke as though she saw you frequently."

"She does, unfortunately. I have to be civil. My uncle helps me out now and again when the governor is crusty and things are a bit tight. But even that doesn't give her the right to poke into my private business."

"Does she ask you to take her to Tableaux Vivants?" asked Crossley.

Felix grinned.

"Not quite. By-the-bye, there's a new charmer in the "Wheel of Venus." Harry Brooks is the chap for finding 'em. But I've turned the tables and put a spoke in his wheel on my own account."

"How's that?"

"A spoke he hadn't bargained for," chuckled Felix, and tossed off the remainder of his glass. "*She* bargained for it all right though, the little vixen!" He laughed at his own witticism; then fell to smoking. Crossley waited politely for details of his young host's ingenuity. None was offered, and the guest did not press inquiry. Suddenly Felix, having mixed another brandy and water, cocked an eye at his companion.

"When does your brother mean to marry Kate?"

Crossley was startled, but showed no surprise and answered easily:

"My dear fellow, I haven't an idea. I was not even aware he wanted to marry her at all."

"You don't say so! Well, the governor told me, and I thought it was public news. That's why you are both here."

Crossley had a twinkle in his eye.

"Thanks for telling me," he said. "Will she have him?"

"Have him! Good heavens, man; of course she will! Was there ever a girl who would refuse a title and a property like that?

The other shrugged.

"Cases are known," he said shortly.

Felix became of a sudden the ordainer of female destinies. He was well-brandied, and the pomposity that graced suitably enough Sir Harry's age and figure, sat oddly on the insignificance of his small-featured son.

"You can take it from me, Crossley, that 'cases'—as you call them—of this sort do not occur in *our* family. Catherine will do what is right, and both the governor and I think the match an excellent one!"

The visitor hesitated. A little was he diverted at the callow self-importance of "The Weasel" (for thus, and not too kindly, was Felix termed by his acquaintance); a little was he doubtful of Catherine's docility, having taken away with him from the dinner table an impression of a young woman of determination; mostly did he resent the uncritical support given to Philip Crossley by reason of his prospects. It was not that Hugh was jealous of his brother; it was not even that he grudged to Philip his position or the easy welcomes of an eldest son. The cause of his dissatisfaction lay deeper than any of these. He was an ordinary young man enough, but life among his brother officers and the unspoken traditions of his caste had given him an instinctive sense of justice and a certain power of gauging character. Here was a fresh and handsome girl; a gentlewoman with a gentlewoman's poise and all the pathetic confidence of youth. Something in Hugh Crossley revolted at this eager thing being, in hard parental wisdom, delivered over to be Philip's wife. That Felix should thus parrot old Sir Harry's opportunism was, maybe, unimportant, but it was an aggravation of an already offensive incident.

Wherefore he hesitated. He could not criticise his brother to the Weasel; he could not, on so slight an acquaintance, question Catherine's submissiveness; he had no right to disapprove the scheme nor heart to wish it well. At last:

"Philip's a close customer," he said. "I'm surprised at his confiding even in Sir Harry."

"Oh, he dropped a hint or two to me, y'know," replied Felix airily, "and I told him

I'd speak to the governor. It's much more satisfactory to have these matters in order. Catherine's a lucky girl, and I shall tell her I think so. Shall we play another fifty or would you like to go upstairs? They'll be singing, I expect."

Crossley rose. The Weasel was beginning to contradict himself. Clearly a guest's duty was to prevent further brandy and water.

"It is time we joined them, I think," he said. "Lady Ormond will feel it discourteous if I don't put in an appearance at all."

CHAPTER FOUR

I

Perhaps it was the thunder that, ricochetting down the sullen sky, jerked Catherine to candour. She sat with Charlotte on the broad window-seat of their joint sitting-room—a long low attic under the parapet with views across the town. The drought had suddenly broken up in thunderstorms. Grey clouds, sprigged violently with a design of lightning, canopied the country side, and from them a dense fringe of rain hung streaming.

The Crossleys were still staying in the house. For near a week of airless heat the stilted comedy had played itself to weariness. The suitor sidled stiffly round his mistress, engaging her from time to time in strange disjointed talk. At one moment he was over formal; at the next glibly confiding. Nearly always, when their conversations ended, he threw back his head and laughed his noiseless laugh.

Catherine, if she were growing accustomed to his oddity, if in the place of nervousness had come amused indifference, wished none the less that he would go. She felt that both her parents watched her carefully. Sir Harry seemed impatient and a little self-conscious in his scrutiny; the mother would throw appealing glances toward her daughter, as though at once she urged the girl to an inevitable choice and begged her pardon for the quandary. But more serious to Catherine than parental expectations was the impossibility, during the Crossleys' visit, of seeing or communicating with Frank Martindale—of seeing him, because her every hour was registered; of writing or of having word from him, because the only sure route to correspondence would have lain through Charlotte, and Charlotte was at best a doubtful ally.

Ever since the elder sister ventured a warning on the day the Crossleys came, embarrassment had been acute between her and Catherine. So much so, that during the last week the two had exchanged only the most trivial of greetings. The situation was of course absurd and false; but so are most mutual embarrassments, yet have the discomforts of extreme reality.

Catherine was the more conscious of the unease that now kept her from her sister, because, prior to its setting in, she had attained to an intimacy with Charlotte that had for long enough been sought, but vainly.

The years between their ages had during childhood kept them measurably apart. When Catherine was sucking a pencil over the earliest hateful sums, Charlotte was already reading French, and even painting flowers on silk; later, when Catherine went trotting with a groom to meets and first began discreetly to follow hounds, Charlotte was very much the hunting débutante and squire's daughter, flaunting her hard hat and tailored habit with the best of them; then, during the elder sister's first experimental love affairs, Catherine had played, perforce, the part of wide-eyed curious sixteen, and longed for confidences in the best manner of romantic fiction, and felt resentful that Charlotte should exclude her from her heart's secrets.

It came about, therefore, that when Catherine grew up and saw her sister still unwed, she felt the gulf between their ages to be greater than in actuality it was. Almost she regarded Charlotte as a youngish aunt, as some one ranged with disapproving elders against her own youthful inclinations to much innocent naughtiness. To break down the barrier between them she had made anxious and, at the last, successful efforts. For several months before this story opens the girls had been the best of friends, and age disparity had yielded to a community of taste and experience—until, unluckily, the first stages of the love affair with Frank, by giving Catherine an all-absorbing private interest, had, as it were, removed her temporarily from the ordinary life of Fleddon and launched her on a fairy voyage, for which only one companion was imaginable.

Thus it was that, even before Charlotte stumbled on the other's secret, there had been threat of dislocation to the sisters' harmony;

and dislocation had come perilously near disruption when the younger had, although unjustly, taken the elder's well-meant warning for hostility. Charlotte had felt herself rebuffed and, hurt that she should thus have been mistaken, had withdrawn into profound reserve. Catherine, excited by her love for Frank and restive under her father's matchmaking imperiousness, had gone from reticence to pride. Matters, therefore, were discomfortable between them and, though both suffered, each was too proud to make surrender.

Now, to the tune of thunder, Catherine felt a sudden impulse to make peace with Charlotte; to ask for pardon, if things pardonable lay between them; to try for Charlotte's love and Charlotte's help; to talk of Frank and talk again of him; to have at least one ally in her home. She laid her stitching on her knee and gazed a moment through the grey fringe of rain into the rain-blurred distance. Then:

"Lottie," she said in a low voice, "I believe I was horrid the other day. I knew quite well what you meant when you said 'be careful'—but I—oh, somehow I *couldn't* admit it. I'm sorry, Lottie."

The other looked up sharply. Something in the delicate profile seemed to quiver; Charlotte felt instinctively how grimly her sister was struggling for composure. Perhaps she recognised the effort needed for so frank a sacrifice of pride. Rising, she came behind Catherine and, leaning lightly on her shoulders, passed soft arms about her neck, then laid a cheek upon the smooth dark hair.

"I am so glad, Cathy," she murmured. "So very glad. . . ." After a pause she spoke again: "It isn't that I wouldn't help you, darling, if you need help. Tell me all about it. It may ease you to speak of him."

Catherine flushed over face and neck, drew her sister to her side and in a moment, with an arm round Charlotte's waist, was pouring out all the stored detail of her love affair.

"And is he so very handsome, Cathy?"

"He is the only man in the world," came the serious reply. "He *is* handsome; that's of course. But whether he be thought handsome or ugly I do not care. I love him. That is all."

"If the animals are so quiet with him, he must be gentle also," mused Charlotte; then added with a little sigh—"and faithful—for beasts know faithfulness, being themselves true."

Catherine snuggled against her sister's neck:

"Poor darling Lottie! Don't grieve about that wretched man. He isn't worth a thought; indeed, he isn't!"

The other smiled.

"No? Well, perhaps not—but thoughts

are easy squandered. Tell me, child, what do you think papa will say ?"

"About me and Frank ? He *must* like Frank. No one can help it."

"But papa thinks so much of family honour and so on. He will never consent to your marrying a man who isn't——"

She broke off, embarrassed for a word. The silence was too suddenly complete.

"Who isn't what, Lottie ?" demanded Catherine dangerously.

"Darling—I mean only a man whose social position is lower than papa's."

"Social position ! A fiddlestick for social position ! Just because Frank isn't rich ! How rich would papa be, if he hadn't had it all left to him by grandpapa and he by great-grandpapa and he by——"

"Stop ! Stop !" laughed Charlotte. "We shall be back at old Sir Hugh and his Crusade ! Of course, you and I know that a man—who is a gentleman—but has to work for his living, is not necessarily inferior to one who need not so work. But you must realise that to papa——"

Catherine turned suddenly and looked her sister in the eyes :

"Lottie !" she said with comic gravity, "does it ever strike you what rubbish all this is about being grand, and all about duchesses and touching your hat to Felix ? What in the world is Felix to have hats touched to him ?"

Charlotte laughed again.

"Dearest! What a sentence! But 'rubbish'——? Isn't that rather strong?"

"Not a bit," replied Catherine briskly. "If I weren't a young lady, I should call it something stronger."

"No—but seriously, Cathy. Take Mr. Greensmith—you must see that papa and—oh! and the gentlemen who come here—are—well—are more at ease, naturally better bred than Mr. Greensmith. It sounds horrid to say so, but I can think of no other word. And the Ormonds have been masters in Fleddon for a long while, Cathy. *You* may not think much of your ancestors, but others think a lot."

"Now you are unjust to me, Lottie. I am very proud of being an Ormond, and I look at the old portraits and read about their battles and things and swell up to twice my size. But—oh, Frank is different. You *must* see that Frank is different."

"Must I, child? For your sake, I will; I promise you that. But papa will say you are marrying below the family—and he will never never allow it."

Catherine tossed her head.

"Cannot a girl give herself to whom she likes?"

The other smiled sadly.

"Dear Cathy, I wish she could; indeed, I wish she could."

"Well, this one is going to!" declared Catherine, jumping up and dancing down the room. "*This — girl — is — going — to — marry — Frank — Frank — Frank !* So there ! "

Charlotte watched her, with eyes at once affectionate and troubled. She loved the heedless and defiant gaiety of Catherine, knowing it a quality that she herself had lost, if indeed she had ever owned it. But in her heart she gave allegiance to her father's social doctrine. There were the Ormonds of this earth—and there were the rest. Among the Ormond class some were a little greater than the others, some a little less ; but they formed one ultimate caste, a caste that might not be diluted. This lover of Catherine's (whatever his personal virtues) was outside the barrier. How should an Ormond mate with such as he and yet remain the perfect Ormond she had been before ?

" Cathy. . . . Does not this matter of Mr. Crossley make things even more difficult ? "

Catherine threw out her arms.

" Mr. Crossley ? He makes things dull and tedious and wastes a lot of time. But I do not think he makes things difficult."

" Papa is rather determined——" ventured Charlotte.

" Papa can marry the man himself, then," cried Catherine, " and all his nasty orchids, and his I-don't-know-whats ! I'll be one of his bridesmaids—with a wreath of begonias—prize begonias——"

" Silly child ! Why will you not be serious ? "

"I am terribly serious, Lottie. I will prove it you. Look here—let you and me find another girl that Mr. Crossley will like far better than me, and then he'll run after her and papa won't have any one to throw at my head and I'll have to marry Frank because no one else will want me! How's that?"

"Where shall we look?" inquired the other, laughing a little unsteadily.

"Everywhere! When we've found the girl we'll tell her how rich Mr. Crossley is, and how important, and how very nice—ugh! *you* can tell her that, Lottie; I couldn't—and she'll fall in love with him on the spot."

"You are cruel to the poor man, Cathy. He is not the monster you make out. Indeed he is not."

For a moment Catherine gazed at her sister. Then an idea seemed to strike her. Her eyes narrowed mischievously and she pointed at Charlotte a solemn finger.

"Lottie! *You* shall be the girl!"

Delight in her own foolish fancy set her gaily laughing.

"Oh, Lottie!" she cried. "What a splendid idea of mine! What a *dream* of an idea!"

Again the laughter broke deliciously. Running to the window she pulled Charlotte to her feet and swung her wildly round.

"*You* shall be the girl! Lottie shall be my Lady Lypiatt! Oh! *Yes*, Lot! *Yes*, Lot! *Ye-es*, Lot! *Ye—es* . . . !

II

After the thunder-storm had passed, a scorching sun set the ground steaming. Rivulets of water still traced their sudden channels down the drive and sloping paths ; the shrubs blazed with rain-drop jewels ; and the scorched brown grass was sodden as brown paper water-soaked.

A little delicately on the flagstones of the terrace Charlotte and Mrs. Anstruther picked their steps and sniffed the air for coolness.

" I declare, my dear, the heat will be as great as ever ! One does expect some relief from thunder-storms. They would have so little point otherwise, would they not ? Your Uncle Frederick, who is often naughty in the things he says, tells me that I regard providence as a shopkeeper—and always expect value for my money ! Of course I don't do anything of the kind, but, upon my word, if a thunder-storm does not clear the air, what *does* it do ? "

" It gives mamma a headache," said Charlotte.

" Ah—your poor mamma ! Is she lying down ? I will go to her——"

" No, no ! " cried Charlotte hastily. " Do not put yourself out, Aunt Letty. Mamma is very comfortable. I saw her a moment ago. And Catherine is sitting by her."

" Dear Catherine ! How you will all miss her, will you not ? "

" Miss her, Aunty Letty ? "

Mrs. Anstruther, with emphatic eyebrows, showed her astonishment.

"Of course, darling! When she marries Mr. Crossley——"

"Oh, yes. I had not understood. . . ." Charlotte took a few paces in thoughtful silence. She was considering what to say and how to say it. Between her conversation with Catherine and this unavoidable and unwelcome walk with kind Aunt Letty, she had allowed many strange ideas to flit about her brain.

"Do you regard it as quite certain that she will marry Mr. Crossley?" she asked, purposely dropping her voice to give scope to Aunt Letitia's passion for conspiracy.

Mrs. Anstruther screwed up her eyes and nodded roguishly. She may have been trying to wink; if so, the result was curious. She pinched her niece's arm and nodded again.

"He is hit, my dear. Not a doubt of it. Such a distinguished-looking man! Catherine is a lucky girl."

"But, Aunty Letty, do you think she likes him?"

"Why on earth shouldn't she like him, child? He is an eldest son, and will be a gentleman of position. Like him, indeed! What more does the girl want?"

"I don't know that she wants anything more," laughed Charlotte. "In fact, I doubt if she wants nearly so much. Certainly she doesn't act as though she were love-sick."

" Young ladies of Catherine's age and position are not ' love-sick ' nowadays," returned Aunt Letty primly.

" Catherine's age ! She is only twenty-three, auntie."

" When I met your Uncle Frederick I was barely twenty-one."

" And were you not love-sick, auntie ? "

Mrs. Anstruther bridled. She was not sure how deferentially her niece had spoken.

" We are speaking of Catherine, my love," she said. " You may be sure that the child will do as her parents wish, and I am convinced that she will be very happy as Mr. Crossley's wife. If I thought otherwise—if I had the least doubt on the subject—I should be the first to criticise the plan. A woman's happiness in marriage is, I always say, the vital thing. Your Uncle Frederick tells me I am too romantic ; perhaps I am ; it is my nature. But of Catherine's happiness——"

" A girl sometimes has her own opinion, Aunt Letty."

" A girl knows nothing about it, my dear. What can a young girl like Catherine—only twenty-three—know about marriage ? She does what her father and mother—and her uncles and aunts as well—advise her to do. Experience, as I say, is Nature's ablest teacher, and how better can we who are older help young folk than by sharing with them our experience ? "

Charlotte sighed.

"All the same, I am not sure Catherine will agree."

"She must be made to. Duty to her father bids her be obedient. Has Mr. Crossley made his offer?"

"Really, Aunt Letty, how should I be able to tell you that? It is not *me* that he wants to marry."

Mrs. Anstruther turned and looked at the girl by her side. She detected a new note in her niece's voice.

"No," she said slowly. "And it is perhaps rather matter for regret. He is a serious-minded man."

"I like him," said Charlotte with a sudden frankness. "I like his reserve and his—I was going to say 'self-sufficiency' but that sounds——"

"I know what you mean, my dear, and I quite agree with you. So many young men nowadays seem purposeless. That Captain Crossley, for example—I am sure he is a very pleasant young man, but he is for ever laughing and joking about nothing. When I was a girl gentlemen were esteemed for being serious. It seems that the modern young man likes to be thought empty-headed. Here we are once more at the conservatory door! I think I shall go indoors. Your Uncle Frederick likes me to write to him every day and I have not quite finished my letter. Do not walk too long in the sunshine, darling. Remember your pretty complexion ! ”

Left alone, Charlotte wandered to a shady seat. If she acted out of tenderness for her complexion, the impulse made her oddly pensive. She sat abstracted, almost motionless. When first Catherine had jestingly proposed to yield her sister precedence in the affections of Mr. Philip Crossley, the thought had seemed a foolish levity. Charlotte had even protested at its slight indelicacy. But although Catherine, who spoke the words, had in a few moments forgotten them, they remained in Charlotte’s mind, acquiring gradually a different and a more intriguing significance. It was obvious that Catherine would have none of this official suitor. Charlotte knew her sister ; knew that under her extravagant and flippant manner was a purpose both definite and obstinate. Catherine had always been obstinate. As a child she had shown wilfulness and intermittent tempers that had defied nursemaids and governesses and even the authority of parental wrath. Charlotte remembered quite well a day when Sir Harry had been fetched in person, because Catherine—then a scrap of eight—had scrambled to the clock-tower of the stables and refused to descend, though bedtime was an hour past. She could still picture the burly figure of the baronet, helpless in the stable-yard, shouting all kinds of threats and adjurations to the small rebel perched above his head; still could she hear Catherine's shrill defiance, and the gasp of horror with which she herself—peeping timidly from the window of the saddle-room—had seen the reckless child pick up a small piece of mortar that lay loose upon the roof-tree and fling it down upon her purple parent's head.

Yes—Catherine was obstinate. She might call Mr. Crossley playful names and dance about the room and chatter all manner of extravagance; at heart she was the more serious for her fooling. If then, after all, Mr. Crossley were to find himself denied the girl he wanted, should he be allowed to go away and seek a bride elsewhere? "Lady Lypiatt," murmured Charlotte; and again with relish, "Lady Lypiatt." "I could do it!" she told herself. "I could do it better than Cathy. He is a grave man and needs a wife to equal him in dignity." She fell to wondering what Maull was like; how old the old Lord Lypiatt was; whereabouts in London was the Crossley house; what was the Crossley crest. "Maull is not far from Laffeter," she reflected. "Lord Lypiatt and Uncle Severn must be the chief people in that district." How nice to equal, if not to excel, the Merrion cousins! Would not Lord Lypiatt's wife take precedence (not only in society but in every phase of daily intercourse) over the unmarried daughters of the Duke of Severn? Of course she would!

Charlotte settled herself still further into the shadowy corner of the seat. Over her head the leaves of a great elm tree cast a soft green light; her hands—they lay lightly crossed upon her lap—shone palely green, as do limbs in water. Out in the sunshine insects buzzed and sang; the near shrubs dripped unceasingly on to the fast drying ground. Charlotte felt in her heart a queer excitement rising. She told herself for the tenth time that she would not be harming Catherine. Catherine would have none of Crossley. Very well. Catherine could not object to some one else having as much of him as she could get. Sir Harry—what would he think? He would be angry; that of course. His wrath would fall on Catherine, who so far dared as to defy his edicts. But would he not be glad to have this Philip Crossley as a son-in-law? Surely he would prefer to see his marriage-scheme fulfilled rather than let the man depart and take his choice elsewhere? Charlotte had a vision of herself acclaimed with rapture by her father as saviour of the family well-being. So joyous would he be at his eleventh-hour salvation from a social shaming, that he would dower her even more handsomely than he had planned to dower Catherine. The wedding in the Abbey would be chronicled in every social column. Charlotte Ormond, who many thought to have let life go by, would at the last surprise them all.

She shifted restless in her seat. Her face flamed with the fire of her imaginings. What next was to be done? Here lay the darkest problem. If Catherine refused her courtier's offer, he would wait and try again. A second refusal would likely send him to Sir Harry, who would counsel another period of waiting and a third attempt. Should that fail also, the indignant parent would cling the more closely to his plan; would keep Crossley in leash; would try all forms of discipline and influence on Catherine. . . .

The pale hands, clasped on Charlotte's lap, tightened convulsively. This would never do. In such schemes and counter-schemes months would go by. Crossley would end by losing patience and his temper. He would flaunt away, shaking the dust of Ormond from his feet. No, no; proceedings of the like would never do. Affairs must somehow be brought quickly to a head. Catherine must dismiss the man in such a way that there could be no second thoughts, no renewal of assault, no long drawn-out parental despotism. The schemer sat with eyes tight closed, two little lines upon her forehead being as it were the docket of her urgent thoughts.

"Lot-tie! Lot-tie!"

Catherine skipped into sight; threw herself on the seat beside her sister and hugged her frantically.

"Oh! Lottie I've been looking for you everywhere! Such a pother! What *do* you think? Patty has run away with the young footman. *Eloped* with him! Isn't it wonderful? Mrs. Paxton is in a terrible state. I think it's splendid. Fancy an *elopement* from Fleddon?"

Charlotte, with the misty concentration of one struggling from sleep, stared at her sister.

"Eloped? With Williams?"

Then she fell silent, staring still. At last, dreamily:

"An elopement from Fleddon? . . . Yes, indeed. . . . Fancy an *elopement* from Fleddon! . . ."

CHAPTER FIVE

I

It was the next day. Aunt Letitia's protest to the thunder-storm had carried weight. Undeniably the air was fresher. Between the Crossleys and the two Ormond daughters a desultory game of croquet was in play. Catherine, in full command of her opponents' destinies, was clicking balls about the lawn and passing hoops and clicking once again and causing every kind of trouble.

"Oh, Miss Catherine!" Hugh protested. "Do not send me over there! Be merciful!"

"Off you go, Captain Crossley!"

And the yellow ball went swinging toward a distant flower-bed with its indignant owner gloomily in pursuit. Philip and Charlotte stood and waited for their turns.

"A great performer your sister. . . ."

Charlotte nodded.

"Yes, she is a strong player. She should have been a boy. You would not believe the mad things she used to do as a child."

"And you, Miss Ormond?"

"Oh, I could never compete with Catherine. I was no tree-climber or spinner of tops. I loved my dolls. And then, of course, I was older."

Crossley leant upon his mallet. He looked under his lashes at the woman beside him. She was suave and dignified. The long sweep of her skirts and the upright carriage of her head pleased his sense of poise. Instinctively he looked across the lawn to where Catherine was pursuing her triumphant progress. She made a stroke and hung forward eagerly to watch its fortune. It failed. She threw her mallet from her in mock disgust; then sent her bonnet skimming to a bush beside the ground.

"Captain Crossley!" she shrilled. "It is your turn! I missed the stupid thing."

Philip Crossley drooped his eyes once more. His companion had not moved. While Catherine leapt and shouted at the game, this elder sister stood aloof, uninterested. It was a pity she had not Catherine's face and flower-like colouring. She was undoubtedly both poised and sensible.

"Our visit has prolonged itself somewhat," he said suddenly. "My father will be wishing for me at home. I think of leaving the day after to-morrow."

"Of course you must consider Lord Lypiatt's wishes," replied Charlotte easily. "But we shall miss you. We do not have many gentleman visitors—of our own age."

A flash of suspicion lit Crossley's sensitive intelligence. "Of our own age"—were the words flattery or sarcasm? He was the type of man who, while arrogating to himself the reserves and knowledge of maturity, felt keenly conscious of his actual years. Charlotte must have divined his thoughts.

"Perhaps I should have said 'of *my* own age,' Mr. Crossley. Cathy is young, even for her years. I have always been thought rather old for mine. They say young ladies are inclined to ape youthfulness, but I confess I am content to be thought my age."

"It occurred to me," said Crossley (and brought the conversation well away from personal psychologies), "that if the weather were pleasant we might drive over to Maull as a party, Lady Ormond and yourselves—I do not presume to expect that Sir Harry would accompany you—returning to Fleddon in the cool of the evening. It cannot be above a two hours' drive. If we started early you would have the day at my home. My father would, I am sure, be pleased to welcome you."

"A very amiable suggestion——" began Charlotte; but broke off, suddenly alive to croquet. "See, Mr. Crossley! It is your turn!"

As he walked across the grass to find his ball, her gaze followed thoughtfully his retreating figure.

The opportunity of seeing Maull was a good one. It was important to see Maull. Lord Lypiatt, also, was an element in Charlotte's problem, and one that required study. Further, a man in his home is often different from the same man on an unfamiliar stage. If, after spending a day in Crossley's company at Maull, Charlotte were not the better acquainted with his character, the fault would lie in her stupidity. One thing at least she could be sure of doing—and that was to show enthusiastic appreciation of the gardens. He would by this means be given a grateful memory of his first intimacy with the family of Ormond; maybe, seeing that Catherine could be relied upon to treat his flowers with indifference, the memory might even taken an individual colouring. This, however, was momentarily unimportant. Charlotte once more insisted to herself that she was not concerned to discredit Catherine. There was no atom of disloyalty in her plan, which had for its essentials Crossley's continued interest in Fleddon and his continued liking for one (or more) members of the Ormond clan.

When, therefore, the hazard of the game brought Charlotte and Philip Crossley side by side again, she reverted to the proposed excursion.

"I am sure we should be delighted to drive over to Maull, Mr. Crossley. Will you mention it to mamma? Aunt Letty will certainly wish to come, and I expect mamma herself as well. Even if she does not, Felix will be there to escort us home again. Shall we be too many?"

He bowed with the stiff and yet subtly contemptuous ceremony that, every now and then, gave him the air of a figure from some quaintly costumed tapestry.

"I will speak to Lady Ormond. Of course we shall be happy to welcome whomever wishes to be of the party."

Yet, when the morning of the excursion came, the number of travellers was only five. Lady Ormond had not thrown off her thunder headache and pleaded fatigue; Felix, to whom the prospect of visiting innumerable greenhouses was wholly desolate and who knew there were but four horses in the Crossley stable, declared himself so deeply involved in business for the coming Fleddon Show (he was for the first time president-elect of the local Agricultural Association) that it was quite impossible for him to spare the day. Rather to Charlotte's surprise, Philip Crossley had made no show of embarrassment at being left responsible for two girls and for Mrs. Anstruther, but had himself volunteered to return with them to Fleddon and stay overnight once more.

"I can leave all my baggage and Hugh's," he explained, "and that will lighten our journey. Also I shall enjoy our expedition the more for knowing it to be a real excursion and not a disguised farewell."

The party set off soon after eight o'clock, in the pale morning sunshine of a day that promised heat.

II

The manor-house of Maull was, in the eighteen-sixties, very much the lovely spectral thing it still remains. Ironically, however, whereas to-day its beauty and its antiquity are prized among the treasured relics of the historic past but the house itself is uninhabited, in 'sixty-eight the building, although in full occupation, was judged by standards of the day as a dwelling-house and unappreciated. Indeed, the Crossleys grumbled continuously at its archaic insignificance.

Between the broad mouth of the Severn and the most western limit of the monotonous plateau, upon which have carelessly been spilt the untidy slums and littered railway-yards of Rodbury (that important railway junction), lies a land of intricate and secret valleys, of winding weed-filled rivers, of beechwoods and of barren stony hills. The little town of Fleddon is one of the several little towns that nestle here and there in this enchanting land. You can drive westward twenty miles from Fleddon, steeply up and down, and still not reach the last edge of the hill-country whence to look across the Severn flats to Wales. On your way, if you follow the right roads (and they are easy to mistake), you will pass near to Maull, which lies within two hours of Fleddon, riding horseback. "Near to" Maull, mark you, not "by" it; for in a district notorious for remote and fairy houses Maull is itself notorious, so secluded is it from the public eye.

The Ormond carriage rolled majestically. Mrs. Anstruther and Charlotte faced the horses; Catherine and her suitor filled the opposite seat. Hugh Crossley, mounted on one of Felix' hacks, was due to meet them at their journey's end, preferring to cut corners and snatch canters where he might to hammering the made road all the way.

There was as little conversation in the carriage as three of the party could contrive. Wherefore Mrs. Anstruther, to whose intelligence a desire for silence was inconceivable, found her companions unresponsive.

"You will tell us where Lord Lypiatt's property begins, will you not, Mr. Crossley? I am devoted to driving about the country, and I always like to know to whom the land belongs. The ownership of land is the only real foundation of family prosperity. Don't you agree, Mr. Crossley? As I often say, a gentleman without land is like a fish without water. Whose property is this? The fields seem more fertile than those we passed a while ago."

Crossley looked about him.

"I am not sure, Mrs. Anstruther. Probably it is an outlying portion of Laffeter property. The duke extends a long way inland."

"Really! How interesting! It is strange but I have never visited at Laffeter. Of course these dear girls go regularly to see their cousins, and Mr. Anstruther is on intimate terms with many members of the Merrion family; but somehow we have not actually met the duke in society. Is it not odd, Mr. Crossley?"

"Not very, madam; for the reason that he seldom goes into society at all."

"Ha! Ha! I declare Mr. Crossley, you turn a sentence as neatly as any one I ever met. So the duke is a recluse? That is very interesting—very interesting indeed."

Charlotte broke in:

"Hardly a recluse, Aunt Letty! Uncle Severn is devoted to sport and to the fortunes of his tenantry and estate. He goes about continually. What Mr. Crossley means is, I think, that he and Aunt Julia do not spend every season in London or every winter at a foreign spa."

"Precisely!" said Crossley. "That is exactly my meaning."

Aunt Letitia tapped Charlotte's wrist playfully with a gloved hand.

"Great minds think alike, eh, Charlotte? Upon my word I had mistaken Mr. Crossley entirely, but you put it so clearly! This niece of mine is a clever girl, Mr. Crossley. Even when she was a tiny thing I recollect saying to her mother that she had a clever face. And I was right."

"You were indeed, madam," returned Crossley with courteous indifference.

All this while Catherine was far away. She sat beside her official lover but heard no syllable of what he said; she sat a few feet from her unflagging aunt and was unconscious of the lady's chatter. It seemed that her attention was riveted on the tired greenery beside the road; but in reality she was with Martindale, wandering beside him in the lush grass of the meadows or hanging on his arm as they went happily through dim aisles of beech trees, the twigs and dried husks snapping beneath their feet. The landau and its occupants lurked on the fringes of her dream, as with her lover she moved sweetly in a world of liquid, greenish shade, magically roofed with layer upon layer of leaves, pillared with silver.

Yet every now and again a glimpse of the country-side through which the carriage passed became a part of her abstraction. The sun had been obscured by soft grey clouds, but still struck clear on some far hill-top, so that the strong earth gleamed pale against the sky or shone like a patch of yellow sand amid the surrounding gloom of woods. Frank, amongst other men, gleamed like that distant sunlit patch; and Catherine smiled happily, so happy to her seemed the simile.

Now they were under arching boughs. They passed a clearing in which may-trees stood, blood-crimson with their berries. Now hedges rose to left and right, thick grown with teazle and with willow-herb. And now a farmhouse——yellow-washed, with heavy window mouldings, set among barns with high-pitched grey-slate roofs—caught at her notice, held it, and was transmuted like the rest into the fine gold of her love-dreaming.

Crossley it was who broke her reverie. He laid his thin hard fingers on her arm.

"See!" he said. "We are getting near to Maull."

Drugged with her quiet contentment, Catherine smiled at him. His words were meaningless. Who was he, this crooked bony man, who had edged in between Frank and herself?

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said that we were getting near, Miss Catherine."

"Oh! Near?" She shook herself. "Of course—near to Maull. How nice!"

He glanced at her perplexed. Then turned to Mrs. Anstruther:

"This land was my mother's. You know, of course, that the Crossley property had dwindled sadly. We have had extravagant forbears! But my mother was an heiress."

Aunt Letty gushed pleasure at the thought of her own weak sex rescuing an ancient line from poverty.

" I *long* to see the Manor House," she cried. " How elegant Lord Lypiatt will have made it ! "

He shook his head.

" We have done nothing to it. It is very old and according to modern ideas most inconvenient. For some while we have talked of building another house. Maybe the task will fall on me. I think my father has no longer the strength to undertake the work."

" A new house ! Think of that, girls ! And you will pull down the present one ? "

" Oh, no ; that would be waste of money. We do not require the old site. The old manor stands very low. I like a house built high, with picturesque views. Do you share my taste, Miss Catherine—you who live already on a hill-top ? "

" I do not like having to climb a hill for tea," said Catherine. " It always irks me at Fleddon that whenever we go to the town—or indeed anywhere—the return means a precipice."

Charlotte smiled tolerantly.

" Nay, nay, Cathy ! A precipice ! How you exaggerate ! "

" Do I ? Well, what matter, if I like it ? The fact remains I shall wish to run down-hill whenever I come home."

Crossley pursed his lips ; Mrs. Anstruther frowned her disapproval; Charlotte smiled once more.

"As I think precisely the opposite, Mr. Crossley," she said pleasantly, "you can imagine that we two are fairly matched. While Cathy puffs and blows, I stride up merrily; and *vice versa*."

"Jack Sprat was far too fat,
His wife was far too lean——"

sang Catherine. Then laughed out "I can't think of any more," she cried. "My muse has failed!"

"I think, my dear," said Mrs. Anstruther coldly, "that you are allowing yourself to be a little over-excited."

The carriage left the high road, and under arching trees swayed cautiously into a descending lane. The hill-side was so steep that the track fell perforce diagonally athwart the slope, and it happened that Catherine, seated as she was with her back to the horses, had the first view of the valley to whose depths they were bound. As the vehicle drew clear of the trees she saw past Aunt Letitia's head a sweep of falling wood and meadowland, a broad arena at its foot, and on the far side of the level ground against the opposing valley-wall the low grey Manor House of Maull.

"Oh——!" she cried. "Oh, look! How beautiful!"

The ancient building, with its irregular gables and tight mullioned windows, lay under the lee of a very steep grass hill, crowned with woods. In front of the house and to either side of it yew trees crowded, their black-green mass throwing up the pale weathered stone of Maull, so that across the valley it shone silver-white. Immediately behind and above the manor stood the village church, which perched, one would have said, upon the very roof-tree of the old house, so rapid was the rise of ground.

As, following their devious lane, the travellers drew gradually nearer to the valley-bottom, they could see in greater detail the disposition of the scene. They now observed, to the right of the main group of buildings, neat rows of glass roofs, that with their white paint and methodical angularity made the more crazy the lines of the mediæval dwelling-house.

" What are all those glass places ? " demanded Catherine. " They look horrid. Just like a railway station."

" Those are my orchid-houses and other conservatories, Miss Catherine. I regret that they displease you."

He was so obviously peevish that Catherine for once remembered a guest's duty.

" Oh dear ! I am so sorry, Mr. Crossley ! Please forgive me. Of course they are. Somehow they seem too straight and new beside the Manor House. Look—all the windows are crooked! It must be very old."

"The greater part of the house was built in the fifteenth century. There are considerable traces of sixteenth-century restoration, and the whole of that north wing was rebuilt under Queen Anne. So the place is something of a patchwork."

"It is very lovely," murmured Catherine.

"Pretty to look at, no doubt," smiled Crossley, "but less pretty to live in. The windows are small and the ceilings and doorways low. There are little flights of stairs everywhere and as for a flower garden—well, I have had to make one over there. As you see, there is only a small grass plot in front of the house itself, and little more to the south of it."

"And if you build a new house, Mr. Crossley," asked Charlotte, "where will you put it?"

"I had thought on the hill-crest behind us, near where we branched off the main road to the lane. There is a fine prospect from there and an extensive garden could be laid out gradually descending the slope."

"But how can you have the heart to leave this delicious old place?" demanded Catherine.

"I feel sure, Miss Catherine, that had you my experience of the manor, you would think it more delicious as part of a picturesque view than as a dwelling-house. Come! Here we are. Now you shall see our inconveniences for yourselves."

III

A silence of fatigue ruled the party that in the falling dusk were carried home to Fleddon.

Mrs. Anstruther had talked herself to somnolence; in addition she had struck her head with lively violence on a low lintel in the Manor House. Wherefore, between sleep and headache, she lay back in her corner, mercifully still.

Catherine, Charlotte and Crossley had each a weariness, each a preoccupation. Of the three exhaustions Catherine's was the most normal, being a physical tiredness born of sight-seeing. She had passed the hours at Maull, careless of what might be shrouded behind the trappings of an ordinary day's excursion. Unsuspicious of Charlotte's scheming and a little contemptuous of her aunt's social curiosities, she had accepted her outing as she would have accepted a visit to any of half a dozen casual acquaintances.

She had visited the queer old rooms of Lord Lypiatt's house; had traversed the yew walks, and watched the fountain play; had trailed politely through the stifling scents of greenhouse after greenhouse with no emotion save that of visiting civility. She was so utterly indifferent to Crossley, that his home had no significance to her mind beyond that of its own picturesqueness. It is to be doubted if she realised—certainly she took no pains to realise—that Maull was, as it were, displayed for her approval. If one had come to her and said: " This will be *your* house, if you choose to take it," she would have been at first uncomprehending and at last insouciant.

Nevertheless, once and with a strange impressiveness, had her suggested relationship to the Crossley family been forced upon her notice. At luncheon she had found herself beside Lord Lypiatt, a quaint cherubic figure wrapped in rugs, too fresh-complexioned for a man so old, with snow-white waving hair and a white fringe of whisker. They wheeled him in a chair from place to place. He seldom spoke, watching the scene around him with the twinkling eyes—half eager, half detached—of one who, if the urgencies of life were trivial things enough, would yet enjoy (and that not unmaliciously) his last short sight of them. His sons treated him with respect, but with an evident intention to be dutiful; nor could they be blamed if their courtesies were brief and formal, seeing that the old man would reply in monosyllables to proffered conversation or would not reply at all.

Catherine watched Lord Lypiatt covertly as the meal went on. Once or twice she caught him looking at her and, before her eyes drooped modestly, had time to wonder if his mouth twitched a little in secret merriment. At other times she saw him studying now this individual and now that. Always he seemed to be intent on the expression of one face. Most frequently was he attentive to his eldest son, and his eyes would twinkle terribly as Philip Crossley made a characteristic gesture or, as was his habit when speaking, raised one of his oddly-pointed eyebrows.

"An uncanny old man," thought Catherine. "He's like a mechanical doll. What is he thinking about?"

Immediately the luncheon was over she had an unexpected opportunity of reading her host's mind. As the party rose from table and the servant stepped forward to wheel his master whithersoever he was bidden, Lord Lypiatt raised his tiny hand.

"Young lady!" he piped. "If you would have the goodness to assist an old man and push the chair for me?"

A little startled, Catherine blushed and, muttering that she was at his service, moved behind the chair.

"Thank you" he said. "Into the south garden, please."

The girl hesitated, wondering which door to take; then saw the servant motion with his hand and walk across the dining-room. She followed, marvelling at the light weight of her burden, which slipped along on noiseless wheels no heavier than a go-cart carrying a child. Out of the dining-room, along a stone-flagged passage, Catherine pushed Lord Lypiatt's chair. They crossed a little hall from which oak stairs rose leisurely, traversed another passage, turned a corner, and met the sunshine flowing into the cool dark house through a wide open door.

Beyond the threshold Catherine found herself on a sunny space of grass and flags, with the grey wall of the house rising irregularly behind her and roses tumbling over the projecting porch-stone of the door through which they had just passed. The old man pointed down a broad grass walk. On one side rose the yew-room of Maull, less famous in the days when Catherine Ormond came to visit it than it has since become. The towering hedge of close-clipped leaves was almost black, save where new shoots sprinkled their vivid flecks of yellow-green about sheer twenty feet of density. At one corner a narrow opening served as door.

"In there," the old man whispered.

Hardly the chair passed through the little gap. Catherine heard stiff twigs scratch and flick against the sides; the fingers of the yew caught at her skirt and twitched the fringes of her cape. She stood inside the enclosure and looked about her.

"What a wonderful place!" she said at last.

Lord Lypiatt did not move nor speak. He

seemed to have fallen in upon himself and sat, head sunk on breast, brooding old age in miniature. The yew-room was some thirty feet in length. Over the floor the grass grew rank, rising to a small thicket about the base of a stone urn that centred it. The sun was so high in the sky that almost the whole box-like area was full of heat and brilliance. But only the grass about their feet gave back the light; the walls of yew upon which the sunshine fell looked sour and dusty, and the points of fresh foliage lost their green and became whitish-grey. The fourth wall, shadowed, was dead black.

Suddenly Lord Lypiatt began to speak.

" This room, Miss Ormond, is the cradle of my family. In this room I shall die."

Catherine, embarrassed and uncertain whether to speak or to be silent, left the chair and wandered toward the stone urn, near which grew a few tall meadow-daisies, the only things of an apparent mortality in a place which else had lasted centuries and might go on for ever. She felt consolation in the small white faces of the flowers, which turned their eyes to her and seemed to say : " We are young and fresh, like you ; why must we live our short lives in this ancient solitude ? " The girl leant against the urn's pedestal and fondled the poor flowers with anxious fingers.

" I want you to know this," went on Lord Lypiatt, " because women have always more power than they understand and because men are foolish."

She glanced quickly at the crouched figure in the chair. He was not looking at her.

"Do you find the sun too hot, Lord Lypiatt?" she asked. "Should you not wear a hat?"

He shook his head impatiently.

"Listen, girl! The Crossleys are an old race and Maull has always been their home. Wealth and display and the applause of silly folk are for others, not for us. While we stayed here and lived our quiet remote lives as fate intended that we should, we were a happy people. Stupid, perhaps, but happy. Only the stupid man is happy, Miss Ormond, because he knows how to be content. Beware of clever men; they are the greatest fools of all."

She gazed bewildered at the old man who spoke so strangely.

"I do not quite understand," she faltered.

"You will understand in time," he replied. "You are a woman, with beauty and youth. Heaven grant that you have not also vanity."

Then only was it (odd how obtuse the human mind can, over sudden periods, become!) that Catherine realised why she stood there and why this aged lord was playing oracle.

"Lord Lypiatt," she said quietly. "Why are you saying this to *me?* I am afraid there is misunderstanding."

This time he moved abruptly and his bright eyes met hers, as, bending a little forward, she awaited answer.

" You are Catherine Ormond ? "

The words came sharply. She nodded. He sank back into his listless immobility.

" Well then——" he muttered.

Catherine wrestled with unease. There was no longer any doubt of the old man's delusion.

" But, Lord Lypiatt——" she began awkwardly, " even if I am Catherine Ormond——What have they told you of me ? You must not think me what I am not. What have they told you, Lord Lypiatt ? "

" I am tired," he whimpered. " Why do you catechise me so ? Your foolish questions tire me."

She became insistent, almost brutal.

" So you will force me to say it ! " she cried angrily. But checked herself and looked again. How old and frail and helpless he was ! A rush of shame for her own impatience overwhelmed her. " Pardon me, Lord Lypiatt," she pleaded. " I was hasty. What I want to have clear is this,—are you—are you speaking like this to me because you believe that—that I am—that Mr. Philip Crossley——"

" You are marrying Philip," he asserted.

" There ! I thought so ! How I wish I had understood sooner ! Forgive me. I could have spared you all of this.

" But Philip said so himself ! "

She came quite close to him.

"He was mistaken, Lord Lypiatt!" she said earnestly. "Indeed he has not even asked me. Perhaps he will never do so."

"Oh, he will do so! You need not be afraid. He will do so."

"Afraid!" she cried, once more indignant. "You are unjust to me!"

"But you are waiting for him, are you not?"

Catherine drew herself up.

"Some one has told you many things of me that are not true. I am not waiting for Mr. Crossley, and if he were to ask me to marry him every day for a year I should never, never do so!"

The old man caught her hand in his.

"You will not? Swear that you will not!" he cried excitedly; but the next moment released her and sank back exhausted. After a brief uncomfortable silence, he gestured feebly with his arm.

"Take me back. I am tired."

In the south garden they found assembled the other members of the party. Crossley was expounding methods of rose-grafting, while Charlotte hung upon his words and Aunt Letitia gasped spasmodic admiration. Hugh, the younger brother, yawning and smoking, was on the look-out for Catherine. When she appeared he hastened to release her from attendance on the invalid.

"Where is your servant, sir? I must protest that Miss Ormond be subjected to such labour in this heat!"

The old man looked amusedly at his younger son.

> "I fain would follow love, if that could be;
> I needs must follow death, who calls for me,"

he quoted. "You have read the Laureate's great work, Hugh? Ah, you should, you should . . . you soldiers! . . ."

Then smiled his secret smile. Catherine, watching them, saw whence was inherited her suitor's furtive laughter. She shivered. A servant took the chair in charge. The tiny crumpled figure with its shock of snowy hair crossed once more the threshold of the garden door; as it passed out of the sunshine into the shadowed house, darkness snapped down upon Lord Lypiatt. Catherine never set eyes on him again.

Because of her youth and buoyancy of spirit, she forgot, in half an hour of Hugh Crossley's cheerful society, her queer experience in the yew-room. Hugh was congenial and friendly; she regretted that he would not return to Fleddon with his brother. The afternoon she lazed away in easy chatter and in sauntering round the gardens and the farm. Even when Philip Crossley walked with her, she was her natural self, quietly attentive to the things he said; genuinely in love with the frail beauty of his home; respectful to his flower-enthusiasms. To his plans for enlargement or for future change she barely listened; these, and these only, seemed to be addressed insistently *to her*, because she was the individual that she was. Determined to sink individuality in commonplace, she told herself that such remarks, being too personal in emphasis, were indecorous, must therefore be civilly ignored. And she ignored them.

By evening she had so far acquired poise and aloofness in her attitude to Maull that (though all unwittingly) she set the two persons most concerned to watch her processes wholly astray. Because schemers in personal relation, themselves intricate enough, are apt to credit all the world with their complexity, coming in consequence to much of misunderstanding and of trouble, it came about that Charlotte and Crossley (schemers both) mistook a genuine unconcern for social attitude. The error brought in its train fatigue; wherefore the two withdrew themselves into their carriage-corners, meditating what had occurred and what must yet occur, glad of the dusk that shrouded their perplexed exhaustions.

How meditated Charlotte? Counted what chances?

Mainly her thoughts played with uncertainties, setting one puzzlement against another, testing and wondering. Catherine's deportment had surprised and frightened her. She had expected to see the girl deliberately flout her suitor's liking, and had come prepared to play off against the gravity of the one the other's wayward irresponsibility. She had evolved all kinds of means to stimulate her younger sister to what should surely prove distasteful levity. To her amazement Catherine had proved docile, gentle, almost cordial. The fact had disconcerted. Why was the child so easy? Was it possible that Maull had done the inconceivable thing and won her over? Was she preparing gradually to drop dislike and turn to tolerance, whence in good time she would advance to favour? Charlotte knew that she would have a doubly difficult game to play, if indeed she must overcome not only Crossley's taste for Catherine, but Catherine's complacency as well.

Was Catherine within sight of complacency? If indeed she were, then had Charlotte utterly misread her sister. "Have I misread her?" she insisted; and could answer neither yes nor no. In fact, she was as right now as ever she had been to think that Crossley's cause with Catherine was hopeless. But how hopeless she could not, from her own nature, understand. She did not see that Catherine was so far from considering the man as a lover that she hardly considered him as any sort of human being. He was the unattractive elder son of a family of strangers with whom she was spending a day in summer. That was all.

Crossley himself read Catherine differently but misapprehended her no less. He could not, of course, share Charlotte's belief in his suit's hopelessness. But even a knowledge of her reasons would hardly have moved him; for Catherine's inclination in this matter of their marrying was, apart from the essential moment of her formal acceptance of his hand, a negligible element.

He, Philip Crossley, wanted a wife and wanted Catherine. The girl's parents had approved the plan. Wherefore the incident was virtually closed. Nevertheless, the tedious necessity remained of flattering the girl by show of courtship. Crossley understood that young women set some store by all the flummery of lover-service, and he was ready to play the submissive for a while, to let the child enjoy her weeks of queening. The task was irksome and absurd, but could not last for ever. Now it appeared that release was closer than he had dared to hope.

He had brought her to Maull, because by showing off to her his home and enthusiasms he could at once indulge his vanity and play the courtier. Imagine, then, his pleasure and relief to find the girl a different being than she had shown herself at Fleddon. In place of teasing frolic—pliability; in place of tongue-tied gaucherie or its adjacent opposite gay impudence—a pleasant friendliness. He told himself (with satisfaction, but without surprise) that she had already decided to drop the pose of pouting miss and settle matters out of hand. The drive from Fleddon had, it appeared, been her last flutter into whimsicality. She was now ready to give herself when she was asked to do so, and in due course to find reward in being Lady Lypiatt.

Crossley was quite content. Grateful for freedom from the conventionalities of courtship, he was not the man to quarrel with the girl's materialism. Catherine might be as indifferent to him as she wished, provided that she passed into his ownership. He was not shocked to see her differentiate between his personal attributes and his worldly goods. His vanity was not that of the man who wanted to be loved, but rather that of an impatient selfishness that found its happiness in gratified ambition.

The ambition of Philip Crossley to make Catherine his wife was queer and warped as was the man himself. Emphatically it was not physical desire in the accepted sense; still more emphatically was it no inclination to companionship. Rather was it a collector's fervour, a longing to possess one certain thing of beauty or of rarity. By one of those inexplicable chances that can make havoc with a rational humanity, Crossley, the first time he had set eyes on Catherine, had felt the same thrill of satisfaction (but many times intensified) that his orchids gave to him. Something there was in the colouring of the girl, something in the sharp-edged delicacy of her, something in her freshness and her defiant grace, that spoke to him immediately of a flower and of a flower that he had never seen before. In his way, Crossley was an amateur of the unusual; but whereas with some men a taste for oddity develops ugly shapes, with him it took the harmless form of love for the exotic beauties of his orchid-house. In short, he created from his own imagination an ideal Catherine, a sort of woman-orchid, of which only one specimen existed. And his arrogant self-sufficient mind, having conceived this fantasy, closed down on it and held it fast. From that moment, with the tenacity of a detached and obstinate intelligence, he marked down Catherine for his own.

A being less remote from human doings, or one more ready than was Crossley to observe and profit by the experience of his fellows, might have asked himself how long this vision of a pretty girl as super-flower would in likelihood endure. Suppose one day the illusion passed or some more subtly orchidaceous girl switched petticoats across his path? What then? But omination was not Crossley's habit. His mind was set and must achieve the thing it coveted.

"To-morrow," he told himself. "To-morrow I will ask her!" Then lay back, muscles and mind relaxed, upon the cushioned seat and yawned behind his hand. The effort of his ten days at Fleddon had been considerable. People always bored him and women more than men. Incessant civility to a house full of strangers and special courtesy to one young woman had put a strain on his endurance. Now that the strain had eased, he felt fatigued.

The carriage rumbled across the bridge. Darkness had fallen. As the vehicle rocked over the cobbles of the market-square and Ormond Gate loomed blackly over the returning travellers, Mrs. Anstruther snorted and awoke.

"I declare!" she cried. "Home already. I must have been to sleep!"

The grinding echo of the wheels, thrown down upon her from the vaulted roof, served her for answer.

CHAPTER SIX

Next morning in the large conservatory Catherine gathered maidenhair fern for table vases. Philip Crossley, catching sight of her from within the house, paused by the open door to watch and to admire. She stretched up to a high shelf; the sweet flowing line of her upraised arm and gently swelling breast; her supple balance as, a-tiptoe on one foot, with head thrown back, she delicately strained to reach beyond her reach, set something stirring in the man's sluggish blood. " She is as lovely as the Fiammetta ! " he told himself, and saw again the proudest orchid of his house of orchids, a graceful thing of golden brown, throated with creamy-white that flushed to yellow flame. " And she hates orchids ! " he remembered, smiling a little wryly to himself.

At the sound of steps on the tiled floor of the conservatory Catherine turned quickly.

" Ah, Mr. Crossley. . . . You have slept well, I hope ? "

She smiled and spoke friendly, but her eyes were apprehensive.

He bowed over her hand.

" Admirably, I thank you. I hope yesterday's excursion has not tired you? The sunshine is as bright as ever. Soon we shall be short of rain again. Maull is a little better off; it stands so low."

Catherine nodded, and her glance travelled through the windowed wall over the lawn, of which the turf was near as parched as before two days' thunder-rain. "It looks burnt up," she said. "See the poor blades of green! They will be brown soon—like the rest."

In the silence that followed he turned to examine a plant, brilliantly flowered, that glowed beside him. Abruptly:

"You should grow orchids here, Miss Catherine." Then, as she shook her head, added: "I ask your pardon; I had forgotten your views on horticulture. But orchids are, as you know, my passion. They are so—so frail, and yet so defiant. They sneer at me, the wretched things . . . and I could crush them between a finger and a thumb . . . if I desired it."

Catherine frowned bewilderment. He talked oddly, this odd crooked man; and his mouth was tight and thin, and now too long and now too small.

"I—I do not think I have seen any orchids, except those at Maull," she said feebly.

"Ah well. At Maull you can see plenty of them," he replied, with the abrupt indifference that seemed now and again suddenly to flatten all expression from his voice.

He wandered away from her and stood by the giant camellia, that from the centre of the conservatory rose to the arcaded roof and scattered its withered flowers on floor and chairs. Watching the hunch of his shoulders, Catherine felt embarrassed and awkward. Once again she was the school-girl, and had ado to prevent herself shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. With an effort she turned to her fern gathering. But hardly had she laid her fingers on a chosen frond, when Crossley's voice made interruption. He spoke without looking at her and his tone was constrained and almost haughty.

"I do not know, Miss Catherine," he said, "whether Sir Harry Ormond has told you of the reason of my coming to Fleddon?"

She could not answer, but fumbled blindly with the wiry stalk; the man, after a moment's pause, continued:

"Your father's permission has been granted me to pay you my addresses, and—and——"

He swung round on her, took two rapid steps, and fixed her with his coldly gleaming eyes.

"Well—that is all of it, Miss Catherine. I have seen many beautiful and accomplished young ladies but not one for whom I felt the respect and—er—the affection that I feel for you. I ask you to do me the honour——"

With a rush words came to Catherine:

"No, no!" she cried. "Please, Mr.

Crossley—please! It is quite impossible! I told papa it was impossible. It is only a distress to both of us for more words to be said. I—I——" Energy faded and she finished weakly: "I am sorry . . . so sorry. . . ."

He did not move, but stood before her, hands lightly joined, bright narrow eyes watching her agitation.

"You are startled, I fear," he said quietly. "The clumsiness of my procedure shows me unpractised. I would not cause you distress; anything rather than that. You believe me, Miss Catherine? That is well. Let us now leave the subject for a while. I have formally proposed myself. The thing was badly done, but none the less sincere for its awkwardness. Think it over, please, and I will come again."

This time she looked him in the face, and her skin flushed dark beneath its creaminess.

"I am not startled now, Mr. Crossley," she said with dignity. "Papa has already made clear the honour you have done me in wishing me for your wife. But I repeat that it is quite impossible. You are too courteous to press me further. I have considered carefully—and the reply you want cannot be given."

Gathering her ferns together she moved to leave him; with a gesture slight but authoritative he bade her stand.

"Before I go away and give you the necessary opportunity for reflection"—he spoke steadily, as though continuing an admonition

—(" Have I then not spoken ? " wondered Catherine. Have I indeed said nothing ? ") " I owe it to myself to point out that I have a good property—to some extent you know this by experience—that in course of time you will be Lady Lypiatt, with your home at Maull and your town house, your carriages and servants ; that my character for honourable sobriety can be established by any inquiry that you or your parents wish to make. Now, with your permission, I will withdraw. No more shall be said on this subject for a month. I will then ask leave to hear your considered answer."

This time it was he that made to go ; but Catherine, wrought up almost beyond her power of self-command, laid urgent hand upon his sleeve.

" Mr. Crossley——" she began.

He stood for an instant, but remained half turned away from her and with averted eyes, awaiting her words.

" Mr. Crossley," she repeated desperately, " if I tell you a secret, will you be kind ? "

The spasmodic mirthless smile twitched once again his long lips.

" Kind ? " he muttered. " Kind, Miss Catherine ? In what way shall I be ' kind ' ? "

Catherine battled both with her caution and her shyness. This man's inexorable calm at once affrighted her and made her desperate. He did not heed refusals ; would he then heed appeals for mercy? Had he mercy? If not—once the dear truth be spread before his eyes—what then? She knew the danger of confession, but she dreaded more the bland persiſtence of his claim on her. Another month and he would come again. How should she in that hour say him nay more ſtrongly than she now had done? If now he passed her proteſt by, why not then also? At laſt fear conquered shyness and discretion both.

"—Kind to my secret," she murmured, "kind to me for having such a secret. Oh, Mr. Crossley, you have said that you respect me, that you—you—are fond of me . . . . Have you enough of fondness to wish me well with—with some one else?"

She ſtopped breathless; watched his tight mask-like face, herself haggard with anxiety. He swung his body slowly from the hips and looked at her.

"So that is why it is not 'possible'?" he said slowly.

She hung her head, plucking with nervous fingers at her gown.

"That is why," she whispered.

He gave a little snarling laugh and began to speak rapidly, clipping his words with the bitterness of one conscious of self-betrayal and, in consequence, self-pitying.

"A nice folly you have led me to commit, Miss Ormond! I had reason to plead ignorance of such predicaments! And all the time that I was spreading my poor qualifications before you, you were warmly happy in the ownership of larger finer things. I ask your pardon—ask it most humbly—for offering so contemptible a bait——"

"Stop!" she cried. "Mr. Crossley, I beseech you, listen to me! It is not as you suppose. What you have offered me is a thousand times more splendid than anything the—the other has or will have. And you must not think you have been deceived. Papa knows nothing of this—other. . . . No one knows but——he and I. . . ."

Her voice, speaking those final words, was soft and lovely. One would have said no man could regard the rich under-flush that warmed her cheeks without a warming of the blood in sympathy. But Crossley heard the words and saw the flush and still could turn indifferent eyes on the dry garden, blazing beyond the glasshouse wall. He spoke drawlingly:

"Sir Harry does not know of this—this entanglement?"

The word was unhappy and the sneer unhappier still. Catherine's temper flamed and shrivelled diffidence to nothing.

"Entanglement? How dare you, sir? Do gentlemen make love one moment and the next insult the lady?" Tears filled her eyes. "If Frank were here, you would not speak like that to me! You may be rich and a lord over men and he poor and a servant of animals, but—Oh, leave me! Leave me! I never want to see you again—never!"

The ferns went scattering to the floor. Catherine, covering her face with her two trembling hands, sobbed miserably, and did not see her suitor stiffly bow his head, then quickly walk away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

Frank Martindale, whose surgery was in Sheep Street, lived with his mother in a small grey house in Rising Road.

The main road from the east to Fleddon ran by the river, between the water-meads and the timbered slope of Ormond Park. It turned the corner of the hill and, where the meadows widened out to form the projecting ledge upon which the town was built, split into two. One half of it continued, first cottage-bordered and then edged with shops, to Fleddon market-place; turned sharply southward; crossed the river and the canal; and rippled up the gentler valley-side to join the Sawley turnpike at the stone pillar known as Fleddon Cross. The other half of the original thoroughfare bent inwards from the Glaive and up the hill, following the old wall of Sir Harry's park; then, turning toward the town, dropped steeply to the square, into which it opened by the rugose corner-tower of Ormond Gate. This mile or more of road, within whose loop north-eastern Fleddon with its honeycomb of alley ways and sudden flights of steps crowded chaotically, was Rising Road. The ascent from Ormond Gate to the elbow turn of Rising Road was steep even for a town so steep as Fleddon, and you could lean elbows on the parapet, where the street swung from north to east, and look right down on Lawyer Matthews' garden, over the untidy roofs of Howes' large grocery to where, plumb-level with your eyes, the delicate battlements on the north transept of the Abbey church and the pale soaring shaft of the great tower cleft into two entrancing distances the spreading fields beyond the silver river.

Often on his way home, when the days were fine, Frank Martindale would stay a moment at this view-point and forget in the serenity of Nature and in the enduring loveliness of weathered stone the pains and cruelties of animal existence. Lately, and since Catherine's love was his, he would linger by the worn coping of the wall to dream of her and knit brows over the lover-weakness that tempted him to cherish in dishonourable secrecy a happiness that needs must find an end in self-avowal. Thus, on a cloudless sunny afternoon, he stayed and dreamed over the pale roofs of the town; thus, as a dozen times before, he swore an end to the concealment of his passion. "Each day of this clandestine love dishonours her," he told himself. "To-morrow I will see Sir Harry." But the next moment came the thought of Catherine and her brown pleading eyes and the sweet husky voice begging for longer time to watch her opportunity and win compliance from her father. His senses rocked to feel her, even in fancy, press against his arm and rest her small proud head upon his breast. It seemed the perfume of her rose from the flower-bed twenty feet below the wall on which he leant. The perfect shaft of the Abbey tower became the rising column of her throat. The little breeze frolicked about him, whispering memories of love-words murmured and of fierce lovers' kissing. He closed his eyes and gripped the wall; his every sense was swaying in a whirl of music; the melody mounted to its climax, broke, and sank into delicious silence. A hand-touch on the shoulder jarred but did not rouse him; the newcomer tried again, more roughly.

"Hi, there, Mr. Martindale! Is it the sun that's too much for yer?"

Frank turned dazed eyes on a young farmer, who was holding him by the elbow and watching him in red-faced perplexity.

"Hullo!" he said, blinking foolishly. "What's up?"

"What's up, indeed! That's for me to wonder, Mr. Martindale. Ai'm on my way to see ye, and find ye grippin' the wall like a mad thing and all of adaze. It's the sun-stroke ye 'ave!"

Frank shook his head and laughed.

"No. I'm all right now, Mellon. I felt a bit dizzy of a sudden. It was foolish to stand in the heat. What do you want of me?"

The other gave a quick glance to right and left. No one was in sight. In the glare of the August afternoon the town of Fleddon slept.

"It's just this, Mr. Martindale. Ye know that horse of Jarge Lean's—the one 'e's enterin' for the jumpin' at the show?" Frank nodded. "And ye recall Jarge 'ad trouble over him last month with a slight strain, and 'ow Greensmith attended 'im and the swellin' went?" Frank nodded again. "Well, the tendon's got inflamed again, and this time Greensmith has sent 'is assistant—'is *new* assistant, Mr. Martindale. D'y' know the chap?"

"I didn't know he had a new assistant at all," said Frank, "but it sounds an ordinary proceeding enough."

Mellon snorted.

"Ordinary enough? Ai daresay. But it's no ordinary treatment that horse is 'avin', or ai'm a Dutchman! Mark my words, Mr. Martindale, there's some as would not be sorry to see Jarge Lean's horse out of the jumpin' class entirely."

Frank shook himself impatiently.

"Oh, come now, Mellon! What are you hinting?"

The young farmer drew nearer and dropped his voice.

"Ai'm not 'intin' at all, Mr. Martindale. But ai'm an honest man and I believe you are too, and ai don't like these kind of tricks. You know 'z well 'z ai do that Greensmith was told to get rid of Bentley and find a new assistant, because Bentley told the gentleman yonder at Glaive Abbey the truth about young Mr. Ormond's bay mare. When ai tell ye the new assistant came with that same young spark's recommendation—well, y' can add two and two ! "

Martindale moved uncomfortably.

" It's not my business, all this," he said. " Greensmith has always been decent enough to me. I was sorry when Bentley went, for he was a good fellow, and knew his work. But I know nothing of Mr. Ormond's bay mare, and I don't want to get mixed up in——"

" Listen, Mr. Martindale ! " the other interrupted. " Ai'm not askin' ye to mix yourself up in nothin'. I come to ye 'coz ye're straight and 'coz ye know 'ow to doctor beasts and 'coz Jarge Lean asked me to. There ! Are ye goin' to turn aside and refuse t' see Jarge or 'elp 'im, when 'is best 'orse is being purposely——"

" Ssh ! You must speak more carefully. Tell me quite simply what has happened and I'll tell you my opinion. But no accusations, please ! "

Mellon looked sulky for a moment ; then shrugged his shoulders and began to speak slowly and carefully.

" This is what's 'appened. Jarge Lean 'as a young 'unter that 'e thinks will take the jumpin' prize at the Show. There are several entries, and wun of 'em will win if Jarge's' orse don't. The most likely belongs t' Mr. Ormond. It's in another name, but every one knows it's 'is. The London folk who have bought Marrowden 'all will be at the Show, and they're rich and mean to keep a big stable. It's gone round that their eldest son wants a good jumper, and will be at the Show to 'ave a look at local 'orseflesh. Young Ormond is damned 'ard-up. D'ye get it now?"

The two men were walking slowly side by side along Rising Road, in the direction of Martindale's cottage. Frank considered in silence the story just related. At last he stood still, kicking thoughtfully at the stones that lay among the chalky dust.

"Yes, I see now what you suggest," he said at last. "But it's not easy for me——"

"Not if Jarge Lean calls ye in?"

"Of course, if he calls me in, he shows Greensmith's man the door——" began Frank; then checked himself, realising his quandary. To court disagreement at this moment with the Ormond interest might be disastrous; but of this he could explain no word to George Lean's envoy. On the other hand, the very thought of an animal being tampered with—even of a recovery deliberately retarded—infuriated him; and his quixotic temper in matters of the kind was so well known that

Mellon would at once suspect ulterior causes if his appeal in this extreme case passed unheeded. "Curse the luck of it!" thought Frank, "happening just now!"—and bit his lips perplexedly.

"Jarge 'll show this fellow Slatter off the premises quick enough, when ai can tell 'im ye will take the case," said Mellon eagerly. "If it's ekitek that's botherin' ye, Mr. Martindale, there's no need. Ai assure ye, no need at all."

Frank smiled.

"No, it's not altogether the etiquette, Mellon. I—I—— Well, I am a little unwilling—the fact is, I had a disagreement with young Ormond earlier in the year over Miss Catherine Ormond's dog, and I don't want the family to think I'm getting back at them indirectly. Do you see my difficulty?"

The farmer held relentlessly to his point. Instinctive in diplomacy, he took the one line that led straight to his desired end.

"Surely," he said, "for the sake of the 'orse, Mr. Martindale! . . . ye won't let fancied quarrels keep a poor beast in the 'ands of a blackguard like that Slatter?"

Frank considered with silent gravity the horse's claim on his sympathy.

"I don't know Slatter," he said at last, "nor anything about his blackguardism; but I tell you what I'll do. I'll let you or Lean know by seven o'clock this evening whether I can take over the case or not. Will that satisfy you?"

"Capital, Mr. Martindale! Ai'll tell Jarge to expect a message. Good-day, and thank-ee!"

Frank watched the sturdy figure of the farmer move through the shimmering sunshine back along the blinding road; then, with dropped head, he swung on his heel and strode rapidly homeward.

His mother, with tea ready spread, awaited him.

"You're late, Frank."

"I know I am, mother, and beg your pardon. I was caught by Farmer Mellon at the corner, and he kept me talking. Hullo! What's that?"

He took two quick strides across the room and picked up from the polished dresser a small bead bag—a bag he had seen on many a day dangling from Catherine's wrist, a sweetly simple but yet a knowing little bag, that like its owner (as he loved to tell her) was at once demure and tantalising.

"What's this?" he repeated breathlessly, and, turning toward his mother, saw that her cheeks were flushed and that she eyed him steadily.

"Miss Catherine Ormond has been here," said Mrs. Martindale quietly, "—looking for *you*, Frank."

He stared at her, holding the foolish little bag in his hand, his mind grappling desperately with this sudden and amazing happening.

"Catherine?" he stammered. "Been *here?* Why has she been here?" Then, seeing the anxious gravity in his mother's face, he went to her and, kneeling by her side, put loving arms about her.

"Mums," he pleaded (and felt her tremble at the old childish appellation). "Mums! Don't be angry with her! It was my doing, all of it; and I could not bear to tell you of it or of her, until I saw things clearly. Don't be angry, dearest, until you understand."

Mrs. Martindale laid a hand on her son's head and searched his candid eyes. Then she stroked his hair and kissed him gently.

"I am not angry, my boy; only I was startled when Miss Ormond came, and I saw her distress——"

"Distress?" he cried—and was the next moment on his feet—"Is she ill or unhappy? Tell me, mother! What has befallen her?"

"Dear son, if you will let me speak, you shall hear all of it. There! Sit you down and begin your tea. I can talk better while we are occupied in some ordinary way. That is the jam made from the new strawberry bed. Try some; I had a little middle day and thought it excellent."

She paused until, munching impatiently, he nodded approval of the jam. Then spoke again:

"And now for the story. It was about half an hour before noon this morning, and I was ironing linen. I heard the garden-latch click and, thinking it was Perry's fish-cart, I called through the open door to tell the lad to come in. No one appeared, and after a moment I heard a young lady's voice asking timidly if Mr. Martindale were at home. I hurried to the door and there was Miss Ormond, pale as a sheet and all alive with nerves. I knew who she was, of course, through seeing her about, and I thought maybe her little dog had had another accident. But no, the little dog was well; she must see *you*, Frank; most importantly. I told her you were away out of Fleddon until tea-time, and she sat on that very chair and rocked herself to and fro and kept murmuring to herself, until I thought the poor young thing would go into hysterics. I gave her some lemon-water and soothed her as best I could and suddenly she jumped to her feet and caught me by the arm. 'Oh, Mrs. Martindale!' she cried, 'you *will* tell him when he comes in, won't you? I *must* see him. Tell him I will be at Park Corner from five to six o'clock.' And then she turned and ran out of the house, and not for several minutes did I see she'd left her bag behind. That is my tale, Frank, and now perhaps you'll explain the meaning of it."

He was looking at his watch. The next moment he took a final gulp of tea and, springing to his feet, looked round to find his hat.

"It is past five o'clock now," he said; "I must go and find her." He bent and kissed his mother's head. "You are a dear darling mamma and I love you for being nice to her. Something has happened, and whatever it is I am glad of it. Maybe the whole business can come out into the open now. Good-bye, dearest. You shall have the whole story this evening."

II

The Abbey clock had not yet struck five when Catherine reached Park Corner. She crouched down on the exposed root of one of the group of giant beeches that, from the south-east angle of Sir Harry Ormond's boundary wall, waved proudly over Rising Road.

When, after the scene with Philip Crossley in the conservatory, she had regained her self-control, the first instinct was to seek aid from Frank. She dared not recall what in her sudden anger she might incautiously have said to Crossley; only was she sure that she had said too much. Had enough slipped out to betray her Frank? And, if so, would it harm him? She must find him and confess her folly; together they would scheme to meet a dangerous future. Heedless of time and probabilities, she had slipped upstairs for bonnet and for shoes and hurried to the town. The surgery was locked and the brass plate detailing Frank's attendance-hours showed his absence to be logical enough. Intent only on finding him, she climbed the hill that led to his mother's house. No thought of risk or of the unsuitability of a Miss Ormond calling alone on an unmarried veterinary surgeon delayed her eager steps. The whereabouts and outward look of Frank's home were by now so known to her, that she felt herself almost an inmate of it and, not until she was pausing irresolute at the open door and heard the mother calling her to enter, did she remember with a sudden shock that she had never yet spoken word to Mrs. Martindale; that this small house with its trim bright garden was familiar only because she had been used to slip along behind the wall of Ormond Park and, peeping down at it, to feed her love for Frank on secret loving of the home that sheltered him.

As she sat and waited, first for five o'clock to toll upon the Abbey bells, then—as the hour struck and the minutes passed—for her lover's coming, the scene with Crossley played itself again in her indignant fancy. The man was no longer fearsome; no longer (as at Maull) stiff but negligible; in his last phase he was at once unpleasant and a little pitiful. The tilt of shoulder that had seemed to make of his keen eye-glance a slanting threat became, in retrospect, a visitation claiming sympathy.

"Poor man!" thought Catherine. "He is probably self-conscious and it makes him nervous. I daresay he thinks all girls dislike him for his crookedness—I did so myself for that matter!" she added, and almost giggled, remembering the scornful words that she had spoken when first her mother urged his right of courtship. "And I still don't like him. If it's not his shoulders, it's something else. No, *I—don't—like—him!* So there!" With the switch in her hand she flicked viciously at the dry husk of a beech nut, and the small, prickly shell flew through the sultry air. Catherine mused further: "Lady Lypiatt with her carriages and servants. Gracious goodness, shouldn't we be grand! *And* our house in London *and* our horrid orchids! Ugh, how I hate them! I wish Frank would come. Suppose he doesn't get home until after six? I *must* be home by quarter-past. And then I'll have to meet them all at dinner, and I shall not know how to look or what to say. But he *will* come; Frank will not fail me. He will look over the wall just there—where the big stone with the moss on it sticks up. It's like Aunt Letty, that stone, with its stupid little bun of moss perched on the top of its head. Ah! There he is!——"

She was running to the wall. Two hands, and then Frank's head, and then all of Frank, and a long jump on to the soft crackling carpet of dry leaves and empty husks. The lovers clung together. "Oh, Frank, dearest Frank, I knew you would come!"

"Sweetheart, of course, I came; the moment I heard. What's amiss, dearest?"

Breathless she told her story. First, and in outline, the day at Maull; then, with much eager detail, the whole incident in the conservatory, repeating—so far as she was able—word for word the talk that passed. When, however, she came to her own outburst of frightened anger she swerved a little from her verbal accuracy.

"He sneered about you, Frank," she pleaded, "and I lost my temper and flared out at him. You are not cross with me, Frank, for losing my temper? Who is *he* to talk about *my* man?"

He laughed happily and pressed the arm that lay along his own.

"Ownest, no! Who am *I* to be angry with *my* little lady?"—mimicking her.

She coloured delightedly and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. He drew her down to the smooth arching root; side by side they sat in quiet enchantment.

"Dear Frank," she murmured.

She had forgotten the situation's urgency; remembered only that her lover's fingers overtwined her own, that firm against hers pressed his body, that in this beech grove the light fell softly greenish and that through the scented stillness came, remote but intimate, the far faint noises of the town.

"Dear Frank," she whispered once again, and fell to weeping for the joy of love and youth and summer solitude.

He caressed her wrist, where between wristband and short cotton glove a little zone of silken skin tempted his finger-tips. But, though in gesture lover-like, his mind (women may dream but men must think) was busy with the implications of the morning's adventure. He shrewdly fancied Crossley would carry his rejection to Sir Harry Ormond. The likelihood of Catherine having avowed love for some other man was almost certainty; for though she had evaded a direct account of her response to the unwelcome suitor's sneer, Frank knew her fierce impulsive spirit well enough to guess that she had betrayed such loyalty as to the eye of jealousy would tell its tale. In such a case Sir Harry would confront his daughter with her suspected love-affair and demand explanations. The girl, in duty, would offer them, and become exposed to paternal anger at a moment when least able to defend herself, being to all intents the victim of a forced confession. There was only one thing a man could do and Frank Martindale, although he winced a little at the suddenness of the ordeal, was proud to do it. Had he not urged the course on Catherine time and again?

"My darling," he said gently, "we must go up to the house now and see your father."

She started away from him and, with a catch of the breath, gripped his forearm with excited fingers.

"Oh, Frank!" she stammered. "*Now?*"

He nodded, watching with lips firm set the loveliness of her alarm. She threw her head a little backward, and the lids drooped over her affrighted eyes. He saw the pulses flutter in her throat and the tremor of the creamy skin he loved so blindly set his own pulses racing. But crisis conquers even passion, and his determination did not yield.

"Yes, dearest," he said gently. "*Now!* It is only a little courage that we need. Come! Let us go at once." And he stood up.

Her knees quaked and she clung weakly to his arm.

"Courage, beloved!" he whispered. "We shall be together."

Catherine mastered her fears and, with a tiny smile, raised her face to his.

"Kiss me once, Frank, and I will be a little lioness."

He, manlike, was busy with the interview to come, so that the kiss displeased her, who mistook preoccupation for reluctance.

"Not like that," she pleaded. "Kiss me properly!"

It was her first encounter with the cross-purposes of sex. To Catherine, as to every woman, a kiss was as a sacrament which, having been administered, armed her and him against all coming dangers. To Frank, as to every man, the moment before battle was no time for sweetness. Wherefore he kissed abstractedly, and she, poor child,—whose very soul was in her lips—felt that by this abstraction she was shamed.

He took her in his arms and spoke her lovingly, until at the last she made a show of being comforted. Then, side by side, they climbed the grass slopes of the Park.

III

Sir Harry Ormond was a methodical man and liked to realise his prospects comfortably in advance. He interviewed his bailiff and his agent at regular intervals ; knew the conditions of his estate as accurately as did the one ; the potentialities of the land that he himself exploited as thoroughly as did the other. In public business he was no less punctilious—fulfilling magisterial duty, heading subscription lists, and even opening schools or institutes with a more painstaking devotion than from a man of his choleric habit might have been looked for. It was his custom, during the months of July and August, personally to investigate finance and problems of the coming hunting season ; and hunt business took him, on the day of Catherine's encounters with her would-be husband and with her lover, some miles away across the county. He had started very early, in order to ride in the coolness of the morning; but his affairs proved less exigent than he had anticipated, and the return-journey suffered from the sun of afternoon. When he reached home again by about four o'clock he was hot and rather tired.

Dismounting in the stable-yard, he walked through the flagged passages of the servants' quarters and by a back staircase to his dressing-room. His son and his guest had, the night before, planned a driving expedition and Sir Harry, remembering this, was glad to look forward to a quiet hour or two before dinner and its social obligations.

In consequence, when a knock sounded on the outer door of his dressing-room, he answered gruffly, and received with an ill grace a message delivered by a nervous footman to the effect that Mr. Philip Crossley would be obliged if Sir Harry could spare him a few minutes when he had finished changing.

"Tell him I'll be in the library in ten minutes' time," growled the old gentleman. "And take the hock and soda there—and some cake."

Crossley and refreshment tray were both awaiting him when, ten minutes later to the second, Sir Harry came downstairs.

"Good day, Crossley," he growled. "I hope you had a pleasant expedition. I hardly expected you'd be back so soon. Pour yourself out a drink, won't you? I want some badly. It was hot work riding in the sun."

"Thank you, Sir Harry, but I won't drink. Your son has not yet returned; we met a friend of his, and were invited to turn aside to some house or other and inspect the stables. As I was anxious to see you, I excused myself and returned alone."

The baronet, with a grunt of overheated middle age, lowered himself slowly into an armchair. His glass bubbled beside him on the secretaire.

"Well? How can I serve you?"

Crossley stood against a tall projecting book case; his hands were clasped behind his back, his eyes—at once piercing and expressionless—were fixed on one of the ornamental shrubs that grew in small round beds about the lawn below the long library windows.

He began to speak with precision and with a touch of haughtiness.

"This morning I took occasion, finding your younger daughter in the conservatory, to express my hopes of winning her favour. I made clear that I had your permission to pay my addresses and your approval of my suit. She refused me."

Sir Harry waved his hand.

"Pooh, pooh, my boy. Don't let that discourage you. Of course she did! With young ladies a first refusal is a prerogative. You must try again."

"Excuse me," went on Crossley, without moving and still gazing through the window, "but I fear you do not fully apprehend the circumstances. This refusal was not one of coyness. It was, for all its agitation, a serious and an emphatic one."

"But, my dear fellow!" protested Sir Harry. "You are not going to be daunted by a young girl's fancies? I tell you that a refusal, however emphatic, means nothing the first time and very little the second and not much the third."

"Perhaps, sir, I should observe that Miss Catherine's rejection was the more unmistakable in the light of her bearing yesterday at Maull."

"I do not understand you."

"I mean merely that her approval of my home and her attitude to myself and my father—after all, though not in vulgar phraseology a 'ladies' man,' I can distinguish between one mood and another—were in strong contrast to my expectation."

"In fact you forced the pace, because she had encouraged you?"

Crossley shrugged.

"That is to say over much. But I admit that I was a little influenced. . . ."

"Then, my boy, you have gone too fast. Depend upon it, you have frightened her. Catherine is a good girl and knows her mother's wishes and mine in this matter. Also she is not a fool and will realise perfectly—how ever little she cares to admit it just yet—on which side her bread is buttered. No, no. Really, Crossley, I must decline to be made a party to this business unless something a great deal more serious happens."

The other darted a swift glance at the old gentleman who was so confident of becoming his father-in-law. He well understood that Sir Harry despised him for a timorous amateur who, at the first check in gallantry, came running to the lady's parents for support. It amused him a little to be despised; the more satisfying would be the effect of what he had still to say.

"I must trespass still further on your attention, sir," he said, relishing the elaborate punctilio of address. "I have good reason to attribute Miss Catherine's rejection of my proposal to—to—what shall I say?—to a prior attachment."

Sir Harry drew his shaggy brows together in a blend of perplexity and irritation.

"A *what?* D'you mean to tell me the girl has a lover of her own? Nonsense, my boy! It's impossible! I should know of it."

"Miss Catherine," replied Crossley silkily, "was good enough to confide in me on a matter which, she expressly said, was not yet known to her parents."

This time the angry baronet sat upright in his chair. His large hands gripped the arms of it; his large round face glowed redly within its frame of grizzled beard.

"Not known to her parents? What are you saying, Crossley? These are strange words to use to a father of his daughter."

Philip Crossley bowed his stiff contemptuous bow.

"I conceive it my duty," he said proudly, "to be candid with the father who has been courteous enough to approve my pretension to his daughter's hand. Miss Catherine told me, in so many words, that her heart was already given elsewhere, and that in consequence my request could not be granted."

"But who the devil——" began Sir Harry; then checked himself and wished he had not spoken. But the opportunity was precisely that the other man desired and he answered swiftly, the note of smooth complacency returning to his voice.

"On that point I have only indications. Such as they are, I share them with Sir Harry Ormond, who, doubtless, will find means to interpret them. I understand that your daughter's favoured suitor is named Frank, is not a man of property, and is in some way connected with the care of animals. It should not be difficult to identify the fortunate man in a community so small as Fleddon."

The baronet, sobered by regrets for his own indiscretion, sought refuge in his normal gruffness.

"Well, well," he said ungraciously. "I will look into it. I find it scarcely credible that the affair is a serious one. The girl was, I daresay, fibbing to give point to her refusal. 'Frank,' you say? And 'care of animals'? I must think things over."

He added, as though by an afterthought of courtesy: "I am obliged to you for coming to me. The situation required it."

Again Crossley bowed, and without another word left the room, closing the door behind him.

Sir Harry lay back in his chair. Surely Catherine could not have been carrying on a local love-affair without her mother knowing of it? For a moment he wondered if the mother were privy to the intrigue and on the daughter's side. Certainly Lady Ormond had not been eager in her reception of the Crossley suit, when first it had been mooted. But Sir Harry told himself that he knew his wife, and that the spirit of conspiracy against marital authority was not in her. Besides, Crossley had said that the secret was not known to Catherine's parents. There was no reason for saying that, if it were false, seeing how easily the falsehood could be exposed. The old gentleman shifted uneasily in his chair. He did not like the manner of Philip Crossley's revelation. Obscurely, and for all that it had been in the interest of his own marriage-scheme, the betrayal of the girl's confidence displeased him; but the next moment he began to seek excuses for his presumptive son-in-law. The man had been brusquely refused and thrown off his ordinary balance. Perhaps Catherine had lost her head and spoken wildly; perhaps, even, she had taunted her suitor with his physical failing—hysterical girls had been known to say things that, in normal moments they would not admit that they had said. Crossley was a highly strung clever fellow and not quite himself. A gentleman? Of course he was a gentleman! Were not the Crossleys nearly as old a family as Sir Harry's own, and would not Philip Crossley be Lord Lypiatt?

Rising a little heavily to his feet, he walked perplexedly about the room. He was not, as yet, disposed to treat his daughter's love-affair (even if such existed) as any menace to his match-making; but all the same, if the fact of this mysterious attachment were established, its clandestine conduct must be firmly disapproved. Sir Harry was prepared to deal ruthlessly with Catherine, if she were guilty of deceiving him by unfilial foolishness. Equally was he ready to admonish and, if necessary, to remove from Fleddon whatever unknown youth may have had the assurance to think himself in love with Sir Harry Ormond's daughter. But to his mind the girl's unauthorised romance was only silly sentiment and of itself merited no serious consideration. Just so far had he arrived in meditation, when he heard footsteps on the gravel of the terrace and, looking cautiously out, perceived this very daughter Catherine in company with a tall young man—a young man vaguely familiar to Sir Harry but yet a stranger—walking composedly toward the side door of the house.

With a muttered exclamation of astonishment the old gentleman craned forward to follow the couple with his eyes. They reached the door and, without ceremony, passed through it out of sight. Steps in the library corridor warned him of their approach. A sudden and extraordinary suspicion flashed into his mind. Lest he be taken at a disadvantage, he lumbered to his accustomed chair, and began frowning at a convenient newspaper. A moment later sounded a timid knock.

"Come in!" he called morosely, and looked up with the inquiring irritation of a man disturbed when reading. Catherine, like some graceful sapling, wavered appealingly before him, while at her side strode the young man with his fresh face and his small dark moustache.

The girl began immediately to speak and with the precipitance of nervous courage:

"Papa! This is Mr. Frank Martindale."

The young man bowed respectfully; Sir Harry gave a curt nod, then waited silently for his daughter's further explanation.

Catherine, after an evident struggle for composure, tried again:

“ Papa—Frank—I mean, Mr. Martindale—wished to speak to you—about——”

The tall young stranger took a quick step forward and fixed the baronet with a gaze candid but courteous :

“ Sir Harry Ormond,” he said quietly, “ I am here to make what I am afraid will seem a very presumptuous request. I am here to ask you for your daughter Catherine’s hand.”

Somehow the words were rather an aggravation than a shock. The old gentleman felt all the resentment of one suffering an expected but undeserved affliction. Laying down his newspaper and with hands on knees, he surveyed with deliberate insolence this second would-be son-in-law.

“ Mr. Frank Martindale ! ” he repeated contemptuously. “ And who may Mr. Frank Martindale be, that he should make this extraordinary demand ? ”

There was neither pride nor embarrassment in the other’s attitude. With a simple dignity he drooped his head a little, then raised it, and once more looked the old man in the eyes.

“ Some one of very little account, sir,” he said. “ Only a veterinary surgeon. But he is a man who loves your daughter and believes that she loves him.”

Catherine had crept forward and now nestled a hand within that of her lover.

“ *Believes ?* ” she murmured. “ Oh, Frank, more than *believes !* ”

Sir Harry turned roughly on his daughter.

"Catherine, I will speak to Mr. Martindale alone. Kindly leave us."

But the girl threw up her head and stood her ground.

"No, papa. I am going to stay! I won't say another word, but I will stop and hear your reply to Frank."

"You will stop and hear my reply?" repeated the indignant father. "Upon my word, miss, you have strange notions of persuasiveness! Perhaps your suitor is more sensible. Will you persuade Miss Ormond to leave us, Mr. Martindale?"

Catherine looked imploringly at her lover. But he disengaged his hand from hers and, bending over her, said gently:

"It is better for you to go, dear Catherine, as Sir Harry wishes it."

Without hesitation and at his bidding, she walked slowly to the door. With her hand on the latch:

"I will wait just outside," she declared, "until Frank comes for me."

As the door clicked behind her, Sir Harry rose brusquely from his chair. The technique of careful sarcasm came hardly to him; already he was assuming his habitual asperity.

"Now, sir! What is this fool's play? Explain yourself!"

"It is no play, Sir Harry," replied Frank Martindale earnestly. "I know that I am only a poor man ; but I am a gentleman and I love your daughter and can work for her. I don't ask your leave to marry her immediately ; only——"

"Damme, sir!" exploded the old man. "I am vastly grateful for your modesty! Marry her immediately, indeed! And may I ask how long this—er—this intrigue has been going on?"

Frank flushed. He was conscious that their months of secret meeting were the weak point in his case and in Catherine's. Further, he knew too well where the responsibility lay for their continuance and that his Catherine must, however lamely, be saved from her own indiscretion. He squared his shoulders and met trouble in the narrow way.

"I first made acquaintance with your daughter, sir, five months ago. That our love has not before now been made known to you is my fault and due to circumstances of no interest to any but myself. I am aware that I am to blame for not coming sooner to see you. I ask your pardon but offer no excuse."

"You are a cool one, young man! Where do you practise?"

"In Fleddon, sir. My father came here from the north two years ago. He is now dead, and I am continuing his business."

"Well, then," came the brutal retort, "I can only advise you to set up somewhere else. As for this impertinent tomfoolery, it is merely wasting my time. I wish you good afternoon, sir."

Frank did not move, but regarded with grave blue eyes the broad back of the angry baronet, now stumping down the library with the purposeful determination of one who had concluded an unpleasant interview.

"Is this your considered word, sir?" he asked respectfully. "Are you not going to give me any opportunity——?"

"I said 'good afternoon'!" shouted the old man, swinging suddenly about. "Do you wish me to ring for my servants?"

Martindale blushed red, and seemed about to speak once more; then his high colour faded, and with compressed lips he turned slowly and walked away. As he opened the door, Catherine, crouched in the recess, seized his arm.

"Well, Frank?" she demanded breathlessly. "Well?"

The next moment the sun of afternoon sent through a window of the library a long ray into the shadowy corridor. She saw his stricken face. Brushing past him, she ran into the room.

"Papa!" she cried. "What have you said to Frank? I insist on knowing, papa! What have you said?"

The old man was now standing by the big desk beneath the main window of the library. His bald head shone and his grey fringe of beard seemed all a-bristle with his indignation.

"You little fool!" he snapped. "Let me have no more of this nonsense or you will go on to bread and water. Do you hear me, miss? I do not intend a daughter of mine shall again debase herself as you have done. You can tell that noble lover of yours that I shall give orders for him to be well whipped if he is found anywhere on my property. Now go to your room; your mother shall come to you."

Beneath this outburst, Catherine swayed but did not shrink. With one hand, as was her wont, she sought to calm the anger fluttering in her throat.

"And you have spoken like that to Frank, papa? How could you be so cruel? We ask nothing from you but permission to be happy. You don't mean it, papa! Say you do not mean it!"

She ran toward him and, falling on her knees, took his hand and fondled it.

"Oh, papa! Be kind to your little Catherine! I love him so dearly, papa, and when you know how noble and how true he is——"

Sir Harry snatched his hand from where it was pressed against her smooth and burning cheek.

"Get up!" he commanded. "You will obey your father, miss, and go to your room!"

She was on her feet in an instant. The Ormond temper was rising within her and her small white teeth bit fiercely at her lower lip.

For a moment she stood and watched him with wild eyes, her breath coming in short gasps, her hands tight clenched across the breast that rose and fell so rapidly.

"You think you can kill love, papa?" she asked bitterly. "You will see. You think I am going to give Frank up, to marry that crooked leering Crossley creature because you order it? I'd rather——"

Sir Harry's fury blazed outright.

"Hold your tongue, girl!—before I take a crop to you!"

She laughed aloud and tossed her little head, while the colour flamed gloriously in her cheeks.

"Take care, papa!" she cried, in a shrill dangerous voice. "Take care! You cannot break me. You can beat me, if you will, but it will make a queer story for the countryside—Oh! Oh!——"

It was a cry of rage and pain, for the huge hand of the infuriated old man had fallen stunningly. As Catherine cowered back, covering the injured ear with trembling fingers, she heard a voice cry: "Stop!" and felt herself gathered in a pair of strong arms and borne rapidly out of the room and down the dark corridor. In the big hall Frank set her down.

"Let me look, sweetheart," he said softly, bending to examine the angry bruise. With a silk handkerchief he staunched the blood that flowed from a slight wound caused by Sir

Harry's signet ring. Then he looked about for help. At that moment two persons entered the hall from opposite directions. One was a servant, to whom Frank cried :

" Miss Ormond has hurt herself. Can you get her upstairs and find her maid ? "

The other, more importantly, was Felix, who, still in his bowler hat and fresh come from the coach-house, was whistling noisily. The melody stopped suddenly as he stood and stared in silent astonishment at the scene before him ; then, hearing Frank's urgent summons to the servant, swaggered forward.

" Who the devil are you to give orders in this house ? Why, if it isn't the vet again ! What, in God's name——? "

Frank interrupted him impatiently.

" You shall have all the explanation you want, if you first see that Miss Ormond is attended to. She is in pain."

The servant, meantime, hovered on the outskirts of the group, uncertain whether to obey the stranger's first request or to await confirmation from the young master. Now and as Felix turned sulkily toward her, Catherine, moaning a little, raised herself from the large oaken chair in which her lover had laid her.

" I can walk upstairs," she said faintly. " I shall be all right. Do you go, Frank. It is no use you staying here any longer now. I will send a message."

She began to move unsteadily toward the

stairs. Martindale stepped forward to support her, but the brother forced his way between them and rather dragged than helped his sister to the carved newel-post that marked the final flourish of the bannisters.

" Yes, you can go, vet," he said rudely. " You hear what Miss Ormond says ? "

There was no choice for Frank. For his love's sake he must endure this further insult. He neither looked at Felix nor replied to him, but, taking up his hat, went miserably away.

Before, however, he reached home again or set himself to think over the unlucky outcome of the afternoon's events, he made the short détour necessary to bring him to the house where lived George Lean.

" Mr. Lean," he said, half-opening the door and looking into the large low kitchen where the farmer and his wife were preparing to eat supper, " About that horse of yours—Mellon spoke to me, you know. Well, I will take charge of the case if you wish."

Then bade them good-night and trudged back to Rising Road, deep in despondency.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

If Martindale's decision to undertake the care of George Lean's hunter were the first consequence of the angry scene at Fleddon Park, it was by no means the last. Indeed results came rapidly and of various kinds.

Sir Harry himself, after his daughter had been carried off before his very eyes and in the arms of her forbidden lover, stood for a moment as though inanimate, so fierce within him was the conflict between rage and shame. He had struck a young girl and his own daughter. The hussy had defied him, who was accustomed to unquestioning obedience; the young nobody, who had forced an entrance to his library and made presumptuous demands, had bewitched the girl. Nevertheless he, Sir Harry Ormond, had struck a woman, a young woman, and a young woman whose protector he was and claimed to be. His fury began to cool, and shame, like a chilling mist, ever more closely shrouded him. He swore under his breath and dropped into his armchair, breathing heavily. "A nice story for the countryside," she had said, taunting him. Of course that cursed interloper would spread the tale all over Fleddon and the neighbourhood. He had seen the blow, and had no cause to love Sir Harry or to spare him. The old man ground his teeth and swore again. "Ormond the daughter-killer"—he could hear the smothered laughter of the younger members of the hunt, could see the nods and winks of fellow-magistrates. The tenants would talk and smile covertly as he went by; he, who had been the great Sir Harry Ormond and master of them all, would now have shown himself not even master in his home without the help of blows! A nice story indeed for the countryside! The very servants at the Park would hear the tale, once it was common property. For the moment, however, he would command his wife to keep the matter quiet. Thus, for a few days, no one need know within the walls of Fleddon Park; essential that Crossley should hear nothing; he must be got away from Fleddon. Sir Harry shook himself. Damnation take the Ormond temper, and ten thousand devils take the young vet whose insolence had roused it! The old man pondered means to punish Martindale for his effrontery; then reminded himself that in the keeping of that very Martindale was the secret of the blow dealt to Catherine. Cursed dilemma! Perhaps punishment was dangerous? Might it not provoke the man to tell abroad what had occurred, so that Ormond quarrels would become the gossip of every public-house in the county? A coward's reasoning! Would not that fellow's rancour of itself prove gossip-monger? Sir Harry growled angrily to himself, as once again indignant memory flamed in his mind. Of course it would! These veterinary surgeons were all low-class cads—little better than race-course touts. Martindale was the same as all the rest. And yet was he the same? Sir Harry, for all his arrogance and his tempers, was a just man, and could accept a challenge from himself as fairly as from another. He recalled the young man's bearing during the first part of the interview and admitted that it had been manly and unassuming and well-bred. Involuntarily a comparison between Martindale and Crossley began to form itself. But Sir Harry swept it away in embryo; his mind in the matter of the Crossley marriage was made up, and there are times when too much reflection is regrettable. He returned to a consideration of Frank Martindale. Was he the man to spread a garbled story out of pique? Reluctantly (for the fellow's transgression was no more forgivable because he might himself possess some of the instincts of gentility) the old man admitted that perhaps this Martindale was not altogether that kind of person. Better, in such a case, to take no active steps toward his outlawry from Fleddon; better, perhaps, to leave him unprovoked and to concentrate on watching Catherine; best of all to send Catherine away. . . . That was the right solution! Catherine should leave home for a while. Girls soon outgrew these idle fancies. Her mother should be told to arrange a long visit to this relative or to that. In the autumn she could go to Mrs. Anstruther in London. By Christmas time she would have forgotten the very name of Martindale and an unpleasant incident would be concluded.

Restored to complacency, Sir Harry looked at his watch and found the time to be already half-past six. As he replaced the watch in his pocket, the dinner-gong boomed through the house. He hurried upstairs to dress.

II

As for the heroine of the afternoon's embroilment, she lay on her bed and, with each aching twinge of her bruised face, planned more rebelliously. Women, being more primitive than men and less a prey to gesture, are in their secret minds little enough believers in the conventions of chivalry. When a man strikes a woman, the blow becomes for her (and for all women) ground for much righteous indignation, with which great play is made in inter-sex disputes. But that the deed is of its essence heinous, a woman has, in her heart of hearts, no feeling.

Wherefore Catherine spared no part of her considerable indignation for the unmanliness of her father's blow. What obsessed her were the causes of the blow and, still more, its likely consequence. She had taunted him in advance with a desire to beat her; then he had struck. She would now be ready, when the time came, to make such further play as might be needful with the brutality of an unfeeling parent; but such play would be mere policy and have its impulse in emotion of another kind.

Sir Harry's great transgression in his daughter's eyes was that he had misused her Frank. He, the rich man in his castle, had insulted the poor man at the gate. "Dives and Lazarus!" said Catherine to herself, better pleased with scriptural afterthought than with Dr. Watts. More than that—he had presumed on his impregnability to tyrannise over a suppliant who, in the actual circumstance, could neither answer nor defend himself.

And then Sir Harry, even after he had seen Frank, could still prefer the claims of Crossley! Catherine remembered that her outbreak against Crossley had, of all things, angered her father. The words had gone home. She gloated over this gratifying memory; it was some consolation to take credit for one bitter, one infuriating speech. And yet she and Frank were little the better for it. If before his paroxysm Sir Harry had been harsh to Frank, how fierce would be his hatred now! Catherine felt that fate had used her ill. She had genuinely deceived herself into thinking that diplomacy could win her father over. All the time she had opposed Frank's desire for open challenge and now events had proved her to be right. Unlucky chance had forced her hand, and this was the result.

She tossed uneasily in her darkened room, and with each movement the swollen cheek and the bruised ear ached and smarted. She wondered if her mother would soon come to visit her. Sir Harry could not have forgotten what had happened. Catherine felt her mother ought to come, yet hoped she would not. There was so much to think about. She and Frank—how now would it be with them? How would they meet—and, when met, what would they plan together? The gong for dinner echoed dully down the corridor. She heard her sister's room-door open and shut, and the heavy swish of Charlotte's skirts as she came down the passage toward the stair head. The noise ceased at Catherine's threshold and a light tap sounded on the panels.

" Are you ready, Cathy? The gong has sounded."

Then, after a short listening pause, another tap:

" Cathy; may I come in? "

The girl on the bed neither moved nor answered. The door was softly opened and the shadowy figure of Charlotte hovered over her.

"Cathy! You must hurry! Who do you think has arrived? Captain Crossley has come back again!"

There was no reply; Charlotte grew suddenly concerned.

"What is it, Catherine darling? Are you ill?"

Turning away, so that the bruised side of her face was hidden, Catherine answered in a low steady voice:

"I'm not feeling well, Lottie; I shall not come down to dinner. Please tell mamma I'd like to see her when she has finished."

For a moment the sister paused, as though uncertain whether to press inquiry further. Then she murmured:

"Poor child! Yes. I will tell mamma," and softly crept away.

Charlotte met Lady Ormond on the stairs, and the mother turned immediately and climbed to Catherine's room. She had not seen her husband yet and had no inkling of the afternoon's events, for Sir Harry's mental stress, which sent him late into his dressing-room, still kept him there. Lady Ormond drew up the blind and in the golden daylight saw the swollen face. She asked no questions, but after a quick examination rang the bell. The maid was sent for ointments and the like, and bidden to tell Miss Charlotte that dinner should begin, as Lady Ormond would be occupied for a short while. Then, when the bandaging was done, the mother sat by her daughter's bed and gently took her hand.

"Darling child, why were you lying up here and no one to see to your poor face? It looks very painful. You should have sent me a message, Catherine."

"It is comfortable now, mamma," the girl murmured. "Thank you for doing it so nicely."

Her face was half buried in the pillow; the eyes resolutely shut. Lady Ormond was conscious of the evasion of her questions. She watched Catherine closely. The minds of both were hard at work. "She must not know!" Catherine was thinking. "At least, *I* will not tell her. It must be an accident. What sort of an accident?" And the mother: "Something has happened and the child does not wish me to know. The inflammation is considerable, but only on the cheek and ear; and the ear is cut. It looks like a blow. Who has been striking Catherine?"

At last, and with the question still in her mind, she rose quietly from her chair and stroked the quiet hand on the counterpane.

"I must go down for a little, darling. They shall make a little soup for you and I will bring it up. Would you like anything else? Some grapes, perhaps?"

But Catherine, motionless, whispered that she wanted nothing yet, and Lady Ormond left her, closing the door without a sound.

The party were at dinner and, as the hoſtess with a brief apology took her seat, Sir Harry plunged into a loud discussion with his siſter-in-law about the dangers of education for the masses. Lady Ormond remarked his vehemence and that he seemed unusually intent upon a theme that did not normally absorb him. She watched him furtively; then sought to catch his eye. But he refused to look at her, debating ever more fervidly the wickedness of pampering the poor. "He is worried," she told herself, "and over something that he knows I shall not like." Speculation fell into a sudden pattern in her mind. "Is it possible?" she thought. "Is such a thing possible?"

III

As Charlotte said, Hugh Crossley was indeed once more at Fleddon. He had walked his horse into the ſtable-yard while yet Sir Harry cursed his own violence in the library. The newcomer had sought out his brother.

"I have come to tell you that the old man is unwell," he said.

"How can that be? He was well enough yeſterday."

"He was bad suddenly this morning. I think he will rally again, but he is very old. One never knows. You muſt not ſtay here longer than to-night."

"I was in any case returning to Maull

immediately," replied the elder coldly. "Does Lady Ormond know you are here?"

Hugh nodded.

"I sent up a message. How are the girls?"

"How should they be but well?" Then after a brief silence: "You have not long in which to change."

Hugh grinned as he hurried to his room. Philip in his grandee moods was comic.

After dinner the three younger men sought the billiard-room. They played at desultory pool, but soon broke off to smoke and sip at brandy and water. Felix described the afternoon's excursion. He was glad to see Hugh Crossley once again. Philip disconcerted him. When a fellow does not care for horses or women, what the devil is another fellow to talk about?

"It's a pity you were not with us, Crossley. We had a fine run on the straight road beyond Tretton. Blackfoot is a spanker. Did you observe his action?" (this to Philip).

"Blackfoot? He is the leader?" queried Crossley politely. "Yes; and he has pace."

"So he ought, if it comes to that. I paid two hundred for him when Clandon sold his stable. But I'll get it back indirectly out of the oil merchants at Marrowden."

"Who are they?" asked Hugh Crossley.

"Some shop-keeper millionaires who have bought a place called Marrowden yonder—either oil or cotton, I am not sure which. It

M 2

doesn't signify, if the money is there! The son and heir is out to buy horseflesh, and I've got an animal that's just the thing for him. He'll see the brute jump at the Show next month and it will be three hundred in my pocket or I'm very much mistaken."

"Well, here's luck to you," cried Hugh, draining his glass.

The conversation drifted from horse-dealing to the coming cubbing season; thence, by some wild logic of Felix', to a Scottish shoot of the preceding year, to which both he and Hugh had been invited.

"D'you recollect," said Felix, "that fellow losing his shirt at vingt-et-un."

"You mean young Clifford? Yes; poor devil."

"Pooh! Why 'poor devil'? If a fellow plays, a fellow must be ready to lose! Damn it all, Crossley, life isn't a girls' school!"

Hugh laughed.

"I'm not so sure. To look at it sometimes one might be pardoned for uncertainty; and vingt-et-un is a popular game with ladies!"

"Ha! Ha! Twenty-one a popular game! Very good. Very neat that, eh?" He turned to Philip. "This Clifford lost about five thousand in one evening at Lochaber. Heaven knows how he paid. The family are as poor as church mice. He was one over, you know. Lost his head. A fellow shouldn't play, if he can't keep sober."

"Well, I was sorry for him," said Hugh. "He looked so broken up when he realised. And he would be a nice chap, if he were let alone. I've never been able to forget his face that night. Oh—and by-the-bye—that reminds me. I saw a fellow to-day with something of the same look. It was just as I arrived. I was riding up the drive and this man met me crossing the sunk fence. He was not looking where he was going. Even when I nearly trod him down he did not glance at me. He must have come from the house. Who was he?"

Felix, after a moment's thought, laughed sneeringly.

"Oh that must have been the vet, I expect. I'd just shown him the door."

"The vet? And why was he shown the door? Had he killed anything for you?"

"Oh, no; Greensmith is our man, not this fellow at all. His name is—oh, Frank something-or-other. I found him in the hall with my sister Catherine. She had hurt her face and he was fussing over her; but how he got there, I didn't stop to inquire. As I had turned up, there was no need for any other fellow to hang round and I told him to get out. Which reminds me—I must speak to the governor about it. I'd quite forgotten. You fellows stay here. Help yourselves to drinks. I'll be back in five minutes."

Philip Crossley, who had been listening

carefully to the conversation, now put in his word.

"One moment, Ormond. A vet named 'Frank,' you say? That is curious. And with Miss Catherine in the hall? Very curious indeed."

"What's curious?" demanded Felix, whose hand was already on the door-knob.

"Oh, nothing. It's all right. I just wanted to be sure of what you said. That's all."

Felix left the room and the two brothers sat a few moments smoking silently, until:

"You are sure to leave here to-morrow?" asked Hugh.

"Don't you like the place?"

"Oh, the place is all right."

"What is all wrong, then?"

"Damn it all! I only asked when you were leaving!"

Philip raised his eyebrows at his brother's violence. "Hoity-toity! The sooner *you* go the better, if you feel so strongly on the subject."

"You would like to stop on, I take it?"

Philip pursed his narrow lips and nodded slyly into vacancy.

"I shall probably return. I have not yet quite completed my business with Sir Harry."

Hugh looked sulky and kicked his heels against the woodwork of the red plush divan upon which he sat.

"—Or with his daughter, perhaps," he added viciously.

The other gave a quick glance and his white eyelids flickered.

"With his daughter I have for the moment no business to transact," he said stiffly.

"Why didn't the girl come to dinner, I wonder?" questioned Hugh, of a sudden conversational.

"You heard Ormond say that she had hurt herself."

"Oh, I never believe a word the Weasel says. He's the rottenest little liar in three kingdoms. All that nonsense about not playing unless one's sober! Why, I've seen him drunk as a lord night after night at Monty Vallard's. And then this vet fellow. Fancy Ormond showing any one the door! Particularly a big strong chap like the man I saw."

"He deserved all he got," snapped Philip incautiously.

Hugh regarded his brother with astonishment.

"What do you know about it?" he demanded.

Philip Crossley carried his incaution further. He was exalted by a mistaken reading of events. Not unnaturally he imagined that Sir Harry, acting instantly on the information given to him, had identified the pretender to his daughter's hand, had summoned the man and brought him ruthlessly to book. Crossley was warm with the pleasurable warmth of a successful schemer. Vanity lured him on.

"I happen to know that Sir Harry wanted to see this vet and teach him his place. The fellow is an insolent puppy."

"What had he been up to ?"

"That is neither here nor there, Hugh. But he happened to trespass on preserves that interest both Sir Harry and myself."

The younger brother stared at the speaker, first in bewilderment, then with dawning comprehension.

"Do you mean——? It's the girl then? Is that it ?"

Philip nodded.

"It was," he said sententiously.

Hugh turned this answer carefully in his mind. "Good lord !" he said at last. Then eyed his brother narrowly and asked: "But how did *you* find out ?"

The other drew himself up.

"I really don't see," he began haughtily "what affair——Still, if you must know, she told me so herself."

"She—told—you—so—herself ?" repeated Hugh slowly. He stared so hard at Philip, that the latter first looked away and then, to cover his embarrassment, rose to pour out another drink. "She told *you ?*" Hugh persisted. "And did she also tell the old man ?"

Philip shrugged; his back was turned

toward his brother. "I daresay," he said carelessly. "I know nothing of that."

Hugh sat for a moment studying his brother's back; then he got up suddenly. "I believe *you* told Sir Harry," he said. "The girl told you she had a lover already, so that you should not trouble her again. You went and straightway betrayed her to her father." Then bitterly: "That was not a nice thing to do, Philip Crossley."

And he walked out of the room without another word.

IV

A final scene (at which in delicacy one may assist but briefly) was staged in the immense seclusion of the Ormond bed-chamber. Sir Harry, hunched under the clothes for all the closeness of the weather, protruded only an ashamed but still defiant nose. He turned a sulky shoulder on his wife who, propped on her pillows, had already by ten minutes of outspokenness damaged a year-long reputation for humility.

"There is no matter for argument, Harry. I am ashamed that I should live to see my husband strike my daughter."

"You didn't see it," grumbled Sir Harry, with ill-timed levity.

"Nor matter for quibbling!" she took him up. "I repeat that I am ashamed—bitterly ashamed."

"Do you want her to run off with this young scamp, then?" demanded her husband. "To hear you one might think——"

"That is another matter. The rights or wrongs of Catherine's behaviour do not alter the dreadful business of this afternoon. I shall not be able to look the child in the face!"

"For heaven's sake, Mary, let us drop the subject!" growled the old man, with an angry heave of the bedclothes. "I am sorry I lost my temper, and a man can't do more than be sorry. We will make it up to the girl in some way or other. The important thing is, what are we going to do about this silly infatuation?"

Lady Ormond hesitated. Her habit of submission, now that family policy and not mere family concord was in question, began once more to assert itself. She could fight to protect a daughter from ill-treatment with all the heedless courage of an outraged mother; but that daughter's happiness in after-life, entangled as it was with the complexities of social standing and establishment, with the intricate requirements of dynastic suitability, she could not visualise. Such things were the concern of a household's overlord; women who meddled with them seemed to Lady Ormond and to her kind at best foolish and at worst unwomanly. Wherefore she hesitated.

" He was a nice young man, you said, didn't you, Harry ? " she ventured timidly.

Sir Harry recognised the change of tone. He felt his customary supremacy returning. Lumberingly he raised himself, threw back the coverlet, and faced his wife.

" Now, Mary, it is no use being sentimental over this affair. I admit frankly that the young man seemed to me an honest straightforward fellow ; indeed, considering his situation, a gentleman-like fellow enough. But even to play with the idea of a daughter of ours having any but the most formal relation with a person of that standing is sheer sentiment, if not something worse. What do you suppose that sort of man has to live on ? "

" I quite see, Harry, that it is not very suitable from a practical point of view. But I want the girl to be happy——"

" Of course, of course. So do I, and so do I intend that she shall be. But there is no real happiness in marriage out of one's class. Even if we believe this to be a genuine attachment and not mere love-sick girlishness, it will not—it *cannot* last." The old man thumped the blanket with his fist. " Good heavens, my dear, can you imagine Catherine living in a cottage just beyond the Park wall ! Is she to come here as my daughter or as the wife of a local vet ? Is he to come with her ? Am I to pay for a suitable establishment, and either keep the fellow in idleness or set him up in a style wholly unfitted for his occupation? No, no, Mary! You have only to think of the most obvious results of such an arrangement, to see that it is preposterous."

Lady Ormond sighed.

"It certainly would be awkward," she agreed. "But even if we decide that she must forget this young man, it does not follow—I mean she may not automatically welcome the addresses of the other——"

Sir Harry frowned. He felt again slightly discomfited and was glad that the single candle burning by the bedside was shielded by the heavy curtain that fell from the tester above his head.

"Crossley," he said slowly, "has not behaved wisely. But the man was upset, and I have confidence in his ultimate discretion.——It is such a good property," he added, almost pleadingly.

Silence fell on the tall bedroom. The candle flickered and the pointed shadow of the bed's canopy shot jaggedly athwart the ceiling. A gentle wind swayed the blinds that were drawn over the open windows. Once more the candle flickered.

"It will on all counts be best for Catherine to go away for a while," said Lady Ormond at last. "I should like longer to consider matters and one could see whether absence changes her attitude of mind."

Sir Harry grunted. Then, after a pause:

"I will speak to Crossley; he will see that he has been too precipitate. Where shall the girl go?"

"Well, Julia has asked her more than once to Laffeter. Of course, they will have a lot of people in September—at any rate during the first fortnight. But it is a big house, and she is very fond of Lucretia."

The baronet saw a good opportunity of ending an uncomfortable discussion.

"That will do well," he said. "Let her go to Laffeter—and as soon as possible." Then leant over and, holding the bed curtain aside, blew out the candle.

CHAPTER NINE

I

THE little servant girl met Frank Martindale on the steps of the surgery. He had locked the door and was just slipping the key into his pocket when she timidly accosted him.

"You are Mr. Martindale?"

He raised his cap and nodded.

"I was to give you this"—and she handed him a letter, turned, and tripped along the street and out of sight.

Frank held the blank envelope a moment in his hand, while he gazed perplexedly after the departing messenger. Then, turning the letter, saw the Boar of Ormond on the flap.

"DEAREST FRANK——"

He was now locked inside his surgery again, heart pounding and the prying Fleddon world a league away beyond the wire-blind.

"DEAREST FRANK——"

His fingers shook and on his forehead stood beads of sweat. Her handwriting recalled with horrid vividness the afternoon scene of two days ago. Almost he heard again the thud of the huge hand on that beloved face. He saw once more his darling cowering back toward the floor and made as if to start up from his chair, once more to take her in his arms to safety. The fever passed; he was alone in his small hot room, while flies buzzed indolently against the pane and a long shaft of dusty sunlight fell on the anatomical chart and on the little shelf of books fixed to the wall above his desk. And for the third time——

" DEAREST FRANK—They are sending me away. Papa is very ashamed of himself, and has given me ten pounds for a new gown. My face is much better and hardly hurts now. I loved being carried off like that in your arms. Indeed, I wish some one would hit me every day, just so that my Frank could run in and pick me up like a tiny child and run off with me. They are sending me to Laffeter—to the Duke of Severn's. Rex is going with me, of course. Mamma's sister—Aunt Julia—is Duchess of Severn. She is a dear, and you will like her. Indeed, they are all very nice simple people—except Claudia, who is a la-di-da. My great friend is Lucretia. I shall tell her all about you and you will come over and see me. I will arrange everything. It is rather a long way, but you will cure all your poor horses and dogs and things, and tell them to keep cured for two days and then ride over. I will send a letter by the post from Laffeter. This note of mine must be smuggled out; my little Betty will bring it to you. Good-bye, *darling*, *darling Frank*, and do not be unhappy about me. All will come right in the end.

" Your own,
" CATHERINE.

" *P.S.*—What colour gown shall I have ? "

He laid the letter on his knee and stared unseeing at the boarded floor. There were tears in his eyes, and the ache of anxious responsibility for a loved and loving child was more of agony than of joy. She was so heedless and so brave; so ignorant of the world's cruelty; so pitifully eager to meet the trouble she but dimly understood. The very postscript brought a lump to his throat; its feminity, its gaiety, its trustfulness and, above all, its tragic futility were too much for his composure. He groaned, and sat on miserably in the stuffy discomfort of his little room. To whom should he turn for counsel? Which way lay duty? That he—a penniless veterinary surgeon—and this wonderful child, who for all her steadfast love was still more child than woman, should defy successfully the power of Ormond and the whole social code that Ormond represented, were an absurdity. What should he do? He could disappear and live his life out somewhere else without the heart that must for ever haunt this Fleddon; or he could take his Catherine away and marry her, and for her sweet sake fight a hostile world. Martindale knew enough of reality and of the profession that was his, to understand the hazards of the latter course. To care for animals and to cure their ills was to his idealism a noble trade; but well he knew that in the world's eyes it was base enough. Further he appreciated the dependence on aristocratic favour for any vet who wished to rise in his profession. Not only was the patronage of the yeoman farmer insufficient in any part of England to give more than a bare livelihood, but the developments of veterinary science—in especial the breeding of dogs and horses—were contingent entirely on the support and encouragement of wealth and position. Suppose that he and Catherine eloped? Where should they look for even moderate prosperity, and yet escape the consequence of having flouted Ormond will? Was he to ask a gently-nurtured girl to try her fortune with him in Australia or Canada? Men had done so in the past, and some few of them successfully. He knew that Catherine would trust him utterly and go whithersoever he bade her. But suppose they came to failure and misery at the last? He shivered and his eyes grew dark, remembering tales of squalor and of beastliness told to him by an older man, who had indeed tried out the gold diggings in search of wealth, but had found only disillusion. Should Catherine Ormond, with her delicate hands and her candid unsuspecting eyes, be brought through a lover's agency to drudgery and scenes of degradation? His lips set tightly. He had sinned enough in letting himself speak loving words to her; so much harm he had already done. But he would do no more. He would leave Fleddon and uproot his mother from her comfortable cottage and fling away the practice he had gathered toilsomely; he would go out into some strange wilderness and start again. What matter if he were to live another sixty years and know no love? He could not lose his memories of golden hours among the kingcups of the Fleddon water meadows; he would be able to lean back and close his eyes and see again the hanging woodlands, the steep grass fields with, at the crest of each, trees like giant birds poised for flight, the velvet stillness of the river pools; he could re-live continually his months of happiness, and in the end die happy, knowing that once upon a time Catherine had loved him, had drooped against his arm and laid her lips on his. "She is so young!" he thought. "She will forget, and come to another lover—some good man who can give her such a home as she should properly possess, and children that a grandmother will joyfully receive to shout and scamper in the Fleddon corridors."

With a deep sigh he put her letter in his wallet and rose stiffly to his feet. Already plans for vanishing were forming in his head. She would remain at Laffeter for four weeks at the least; likely enough for longer. He must fulfil his promise to George Lean; after the Show was over he would steal away and leave the little house in Rising Road to tenants less presumptuous. When she came home again, he would be gone. . . .

Steps along the street and a sharp knock at his outer door roused him from the lethargy of mental suffering. He opened to a young man, fashionably dressed and with a handsome healthy face. The stranger spoke immediately.

"Mr. Martindale. Can you spare me a moment?"

Frank stood aside, and the visitor strode into the surgery. Once the door was shut, he spoke abruptly:

"Look here, I daresay you'll think me an interfering sort of fellow; but I'm a soldier, and when I feel a thing, I say it. My name is Crossley——"

Frank drew himself up, with a sharpness that did not escape the stranger's notice.

"Oh, no!" he laughed—"not that one. I am his brother. The fact is, I—well, by a series of chances I have become involved in—in the affair you know of. I know it's not my business, but I saw you the day before yesterday and liked the look of you, and the girl is a thoroughbred. So——"

"One moment," interrupted Frank. "Please tell me whether you are a—an ambassador—if I may so phrase it?"

"An ambassador? A sort of flag of truce fellow, you mean? Not a bit of it. I'm here on my own. Not a soul knows I've come."

Frank bowed.

"In that case, Mr. Crossley, I shall be glad to hear what you have to say."

"Now, my dear fellow, don't be stand-off with me. One never knows when a friend may be useful. What I came to say is that you are both of you in for a bad time and that, if a reinforcement is ever needed, Hugh Crossley is your man. That's all. Now I'll be off."

He turned to go. Frank stepped forward with outstretched hand.

" Mr. Crossley, you must forgive my bearishness. I was not ready to discuss Miss Ormond with a stranger. Thank you. I will remember."

They shook hands.

" Bother all that ! After all, one has to see fair play, y'know. Here's my card. A letter to headquarters will always find me. As for what will happen now, one can only wait and see. You don't need me to tell you that the girl's one to hang on to through thick and thin. By gad, I'm half in love with her myself and I never saw her until three days ago ! Stick it, Martindale ; stick it like hell, and let the best man win ! "

He clapped his hat on his head, whisked out of the house and down the street, leaving Frank aglow with this sudden cheerful encouragement, his laborious plans for sacrifice of self in ruins on the bare floor of the little surgery.

A man will grasp at chance of delay in making hard decisions where a woman—more swift in her ambitions, less subject to the threat of danger from without—will force an issue for its very difficulty. Frank, checked in the hour of his renunciation by the appearance of a sudden friend, was little loth to turn his mind to urgent problems of his work and leave his private tangle for a while longer unexplored. "Stick it like hell!" Crossley had said. Perhaps that way lay courage? Perhaps the brave retirement he had planned were only cowardice? "I must be sure," he told himself. "I must think carefully and see what happens. In the meantime I have a thousand things to do."

But while he did them, the days slipped by, and this perplexing problem of his future and of Catherine's was being canvassed from the other end. Frank had regarded Laffeter as a withdrawal, and so it was. But in retirement ladies scheme, and Catherine at Laffeter was not, as he assumed, Catherine passive.

II

Because, in another and as yet unwritten chronicle, you will likely be brought once more to Laffeter and into contact with another Duke of Severn, you shall not here be troubled with the history of that mansion and its owners. For this once, trespass where I lead and take the facts for granted. Pass through the park and by the cupola over the stable-arch; follow the curve that crosses the King's Bridge and leaves the little stream leaping its waterfall some twenty feet below, and, hurrying beneath the long windows of the western front, make zigzag way across the formal garden to the square Italian summer-house. This marks the south point of the great terrace and looks across the scattered threads of Severn to the Welsh hills. Tread softly!—for in this summer-house, beside a table heaped with silks and bright with coloured thread, sits Catherine Ormond with the Lady Lucretia Merrion, her favourite cousin.

Both girls are busy with their work and with their tongues. Already for a week the case of Catherine and Frank has been discussed and sighed over; day after day Lucretia has asked eager shining questions and thrilled to hear her cousin's tale and asked more questions and given sympathy. The time of telling over Frank and all he said and all he did is now gone by; the sterner hour has come, in which woman must rescue man from the perplexities that seem to him so terrible, that are in fact so trivial beside the one great fact of love.

Lucretia stabs the table with her needle.

"It is sure, my dear," she says judicially, "that my uncle Ormond will never change his mind. If I were in your place, I know what I should do."

Catherine looks doubtfully.

"You in my place, Lou? With papa to deal with or with Uncle Severn?"

Lucretia laughs.

"Oh, my own papa, please!"

"Well then——"

"No, miss. Not 'well then,' entirely! To do what I should do would set all fathers in a class. Fathers are all alike at bottom."

"Then they are varied on the surface, Lou! But the great plan——?"

Lucretia stitches busily. She frowns over her work and the solemnity may well be that of needlecraft.

"In your place, Cathy," she says, "I should run away."

There is a moment's silence. The admonitress, a little grieved to hear no cry of timid wonder at her daring, glances across the table at her friend. Catherine is gazing over the valley—preoccupied, indeed, and with cloudy eyes, but calm."

"I had thought I might do that," she says at last. She speaks so quietly that Lucretia knows at once that she is serious, and glows to feel so near at hand the fire of genuine romance.

"Oh, Cathy!" she breathes, forgetting in her real excitement that she herself urged but a moment back this very recklessness. Over the pastures and serenities of Laffeter is wafted something of the high generosities of love. And again: "Oh, Cathy!"

"Yes," continued Catherine. "I have thought of it and still think of it. The difficulty is that I have so little ready money."

"How much do elopements cost, then, prudent cousin?"

"Horrid! It is not that. But one must pay for the gig or——"

"Gig! Cathy, you shame yourself! Young ladies do not elope in gigs! In a barouche, with outriders—straight from the postern-gate to London town."

"Lou—it is not your task to laugh at me. I am quite serious; and when I am serious, you must help me. You have always helped me, Lou, and you will not fail me now."

Once more the sweet scent of adventurous romance hangs heavy on the air. Lucretia leans back and ponders in a kind of breathless dream. When she begins to speak, it is excitedly enough:

"You shall do it from *here*, Cathy. Yes, yes, from *here!* See, I have fifty pounds locked in my writing desk upstairs. That with your money will be ample. Horses can easily be planned for. In the night we slip down the terrace steps and through the trees yonder to the valley road. There is an old gate there—so old that it is never wholly shut—and the lodge is ruined, and none of the men lives on that side of the park. Ride south and you will strike the Bristol-Devizes road. Then for the railway train and London. No, no!"—as Catherine makes to speak—"Let me finish. *I* will arrange it all. My groom will do it for me—and keep mum. Oh, Cathy, what fun, what fun!"

"Gently, my dear; for goodness' sake, more gently!" laughs Catherine. "I speak a thought aloud and—hey presto!—you produce a full-fledged conspiracy, like a conjurer from your hat! Remember Frank, please! He must come too. Elopements on one's own are tedious. Besides—he might not be willing."

"Stuff and nonsense! Gentlemen are always willing."

"Oh-ho, Miss Experience!"

"No, Cathy. I don't mean it that way. You know I don't. But your Frank is not the person to hang back. Is he now?"

Catherine admitted that he was not.

"All the same, I must ask him. Think out a scheme for our meeting, dearest Lou, and I will love you more than ever."

Elsewhere at Laffeter the same engrossing problem of Miss Ormond and her so presumptuous lover kept female tongues at work. While Catherine and Lucretia thus whispered eagerly over their sewing, Charlotte sought wisdom from Lucretia's elder sister.

The Lady Claudia (whom Catherine, the impertinent, had called a la-di-da) was oracle to many beside her Ormond cousins. She was a tall and very handsome girl; her long calm features and white brow, crowned with its coils of hair, spoke instantly of race and of supremacy. Young ladies of the eighteen-sixties were termed " sensible," where now they would be cynics. The Lady Claudia was sensible. Frocester, her eldest brother, called her " The Ladies' Mirror "—a nickname of more meaning in the days when it was given than to our modern minds. There had not long before been opened in London an amusement hall among whose popular diversions was a room of convex and of concave looking-glass. The most distorting corner of this room was called " The Ladies' Mirror," and this name had in itself ironical reference to a once well-known and improving publication that annually led British maidens to the shrine of fashionable chastity. Thus, when Frocester named his sister as he did, he hinted no less at her power of astringent criticism of others than at her own perfections. Claudia accepted the label good-humouredly enough.

" Why only 'ladies'?" she asked. " Are gentlemen immune?"

Frocester bowed.

" They are your very humble slaves, Claudia, and beauty smiles on them——"

" — and passes by," she finished, laughing.

To Claudia, then, Charlotte Ormond made statement of the Fleddon disagreements. She concealed nothing save her own ambitions. Nevertheless, when she had finished——

" In other words, my dear," said Claudia, " you want the man yourself?"

As she spoke, she smiled a little and the lids drooped over her searching eyes.

Charlotte, not easily discomposed, nodded unruffled.

"I could manage him," she said.

"I like you, Charlotte," returned the other. "I like a girl to know her mind and her capacities. I have met your Crossley several times. He is an ill-conditioned creature, but, I suspect, a weakling. Peevish men are always weak. If you think 'Lady Lypiatt' a pleasant name and Maull a pleasant property—well, I shall be glad to have you as a nearer neighbour."

"Thank you, Claudia. But things are not so simple. It is one thing to help my little Cathy to the man she wants; another to help myself. You see?"

"Even the first needs thought. What like is this person for whom Catherine has lost her head?"

"I hardly know. I have no more than seen him. He is tall and handsome and pleasant-looking—but—well, if he is a gentleman he is just that."

"Tall handsome men are frequent enough. The lower orders are surprisingly well built; but one does not marry for physique—at least not admittedly."

Charlotte was shocked. Every now and again Claudia would say these uncomfortable things. Presumably a duke's daughter had privileges. . . .

"I do not like that kind of remark," she said.

Claudia laughed.

"Dear Lottie, forgive me. I had forgotten we were at Laffeter. In town conversation is so different. But this Martindale—he will slink away now, humbly. Is that not so?"

"What else can he do? Papa will never let him near her. Then she will pine and Mr. Crossley will be sorry for her, and pity, as we know——"

"No, no!" the other interrupted. "Philip Crossley is not a man to pity any one. He must be given something he wants more than Catherine. That will cure him, and she can waste away to her heart's content."

"I have wondered——" began Charlotte, "whether—perhaps——"

She stopped. Claudia showed no curiosity. Part of her strength was it that she let faltering topics die unsuccoured. Charlotte's appealing glance was pleasantly ignored. To broach, in the teeth of her cousin's sudden remoteness, a theme at once so banal and so extravagant as was an elopement needed a greater obstinacy than she possessed. She left her sentence in the air. The conversation ended.

III

One evening about a week later, Frocester and his brother Percival returned from the

Fleddon Agricultural Show. At dinner they gave a general account of the day's events. There was exchange of comment and the conditions of local prosperity were canvassed. After dinner, in company with the other men then guests at Laffeter, they talked of happenings unsuited to discussion at a dinner table.

There had been trouble at the Show—not public trouble, but of a kind that persons in the inner ring of officers, vice-presidents and stewards, had experienced at close quarters. The principal event of the day was always the jumping competition, and the judges of the jumping class for the present year were Moreton Ashworth, J.P., of Ashworth Hall, President of the Fleddon Agricultural Association, and Felix Ormond. That Felix should have been appointed to this office had already aroused some criticism when, a day or two before the Show, the programme had been issued. It was generally known that one of the competing horses, though in another name, was virtually an Ormond horse, and half-a-dozen of the more radical townsmen had taken the opportunity of airing their anti-feudal views. As with so many discontents, there was enough of truth in their complaint to feed their anger, but not quite sufficient for its triumph. In itself, the appointment was wholly normal. Felix was president-elect for the year following, and by established custom to judge the jumping class was a prerogative of the two presidents—actual and future. The sting lay in the fact that many a man in Felix' place, having himself decided indirectly to compete, would have resigned his judgeship. The local critics were not inclined to fine distinctions. They saw young Ormond where (in their view) he should not rightly be, and laid the blame with emphasis on the entire committee. Whether this same committee—of which Sir Harry was permanent chairman, and many of the members Ormond nominees—desired or even had the power to influence Felix one way or the other is immaterial. The outcome was that Felix showed no inclination to withdraw and that, as it was no one's business to compel him, he remained.

The public watched the jumping and was content to know that the best horse had won. This horse belonged to George Lean, a local farmer of consequence and substance. It had been brilliantly ridden by Lean's younger brother, and although closely pressed by what (for convenience' sake) may be termed Felix' horse, had, in the eyes of knowing onlookers, deserved the prize.

But later in the afternoon a man had come running to the enclosure, where the officers and stewards were taking their refreshment before proceeding to the last section of the day's events. Lean's horse had had an accident. The animal was badly cut and bleeding.

Several gentlemen, including Frocester and his brother, had hurried to investigate.

" There the brute was," declared Frocester, as he told the tale, " with one knee and one hock badly cut, and running blood from other cuts and scratches. A lovely creature—I could have wept to see him ! Trembling all over he was. The fellow he belongs to was white with anger ; two of his friends had hold of a foxy-faced chap ; every one was shouting. It seems the horse had been put at some fences near about. There was a fellow there—the son of some man who has bought Marrowden yonder—who fancied the horse, and I suppose had asked for a little exhibition. I could not clearly understand from the lot of them talking at once, but I believe that after several jumps the animal was put at a high bank, at the top of which, all tangled in the bushes, was some rusty wire. He came down heavily and—this is the extraordinary thing—on the other side, where he fell, there was no end of broken glass, scattered in the long grass ! "

" Whew ! That's some one's dirty work ! " declared an auditor.

" Obviously. Hence the row. Lean declared the whole thing was a put-up job. The final jump was a suggestion of this Marrowden chap, who admitted that it had been suggested to him during the earlier tests by a fellow who was assistant to old Greensmith, the Fleddon vet—a fellow called Slatter. They found

Mister Slatter and gripped on to him. At that point we all arrived."

"And then?" the listeners demanded eagerly.

Percival Merrion took up the tale.

"Ashworth, very sour and stately—you know the old chap? A sort of disappointed emperor—called for silence; began asking questions. Of course it wasn't really his business—nor any of ours, for that matter; but there we all were. I thought we should never get anywhere, they were so excited. At last a young vet, who had been attending to the horse itself and had been arranging for it to be taken home, stepped forward and volunteered a statement."

"Another vet? Not one of Greensmith's men?"

"No. A young fellow called—called—Martin, I think——"

"Frank Martindale," said one of the men. "I know him. His father died a little while ago. He's a good chap is Martindale."

"That's the man. Well, he seemed fairly intelligent, which is more than any of the others were, and old Ashworth told him to say what he had to say. It was not a great deal, but it amounted to this—that he had been helping to prepare Lean's horse for the Show, and knew that it had been put through nearly every test in the immediate neighbourhood, including, to the best of his belief, this actual jump. He could not understand why Mr. What's-his-name from Marrowden should have had this special bank suggested to him.

" At this point a very young farmer broke in. *He* could understand it very easily. The thing was done on purpose, and by the fellow Slatter. Ashworth asks haughtily why Slatter should be involved. ' Because,' shouts the farmer, ' Lean kicked him out of his place three weeks ago, and got Mr. Martindale to come instead. That's why, sir, and reason enough for the likes o' him.' ' Why didn't you tell me this ? ' demands Ashworth of Martindale.

" The young fellow stands silent, and at last says he did not feel it his duty to say anything about his competitors.

" ' What do you mean, sir ? ' says Ashworth.

" ' Well, sir—Lean called me in because he was dissatisfied with Mr. Greensmith's assistant. I agreed in the ordinary way of business, but I know nothing of Lean's reasons. They are not my concern.'

" Ashworth was just going to question the man Slatter—and a less prepossessing object I never saw, did you, Frocester ?—when young Ormond twitches his sleeve. They go aside, and Ashworth, after a little whispering, comes back to the waiting group.

" ' I will investigate this whole matter later,' he says very pompously. ' This evening in the Drill Hall at eight o'clock I will take evidence.'

"Then he stalks away, and we all follow, wondering whether to miss our dinner and see the thing out or wait for news next day."

"You chose dinner, Percival, eh?" asked one of the men.

"There was no need to choose one or the other," retorted Percival. "When we got to the stewards' tent again, and Ashworth had sent word for the judges of the driving classes to proceed, young Ormond got at him again."

"Young Ormond! What had he to do with it?"

"Well, I didn't hear all that he said to Ashworth, but he seems to have given this fellow Slatter a character. He knows him well and goes surety for his honesty. I rather fancy that he also blackguarded Martindale, practically accusing him of having brought the charge against Slatter from professional jealousy. Poor old Ashworth was babbling that he did not know Martindale to be a Radical, and a leveller and so on—all of which came, I imagine, in the first instance from our friend Ormond."

"Oh, oh!" cried the man who had earlier spoken up for Frank. "What ridiculous nonsense! Martindale is as harmless as I am."

"I hope so, indeed. But we knew nothing of that. Anyway, Ashworth had had all he could stand and believed every word."

"So what happened?"

The narrator shrugged.

" The whole thing petered out. After all, the president was acting *ultra vires* in even talking of his foolish inquiry. Ashworth sent word to Lean that he was satisfied the thing was a mischance, and no one's responsibility. There was a formal expression of sympathy. That was all."

Frank's defender was dissatisfied.

" Damned feeble," he grumbled. " There'll be trouble for long enough, you mark my words. They will say the affair was hushed up by Ormond's influence. However, it's not my business, I'm glad to say, nor my part of the county."

The party broke up. Next morning the same objector told his wife the story of the accident. She in her turn and later in the day repeated it to other ladies, among whom was Lucretia. By tea time it had reached Catherine's ears, and set them tingling. She locked herself into her room and wrote a long letter to her lover.

CHAPTER TEN

I

This letter—a brave one, full of consolation and encouragement—passed, unluckily, one day too late. Its message was outstripped by circumstances, for affairs at Fleddon, from the unlucky Show day onward, made good speed for melodrama.

The story of the maiming of the prize-winner was, as related by Frocester and his brother to their friends at Laffeter, as accurate as in the circumstances it could have been. These young gentlemen had witnessed but the last stage of the imbroglio and could not, in the nature of things, have learnt the details of what earlier passed without such discreet and individual inquiry as they were—not surprisingly—unconcerned to make.

Among the several influences that combined to set things awry was (most importantly) the character of Moreton Ashworth. He was a shy man of unfriendly manners, a farming faddist, who had tried out all kinds of modern methods and had success with them to a greater degree than his conservative neighbours were happy to admit. This difference of technique stressed the unease that will inevitably brood over the relations of such a man as Ashworth with country gentlemen of the self-confident and heaven-ordained variety, to which Sir Harry Ormond most conspicuously pertained. Ashworth felt himself in some way excluded from the local aristocracy to which, alike by birth and fortune, he properly belonged. Like many another he sought refuge in aloof dignity, which only increased his own discomfort and won him a reputation (wholly undeserved) for arrogance. His election to the presidency of the Agricultural Association had seemed at first an opportunity for greater comradeship; but by ill-chance a tale had reached him that his preferment was due only to Sir Harry Ormond's blank rejection of Lord Hettisham—a recently ennobled ironfounder. Ashworth could hear Sir Harry growl a churlish consent. " Better a prig, he thinks, than a damned ironmonger ! " Ashworth told himself. " I am at least one rung above the parvenu ! " Bitterly and for a whole hour he had paced the long low gallery at Ashworth Hall, where, beneath delicate mouldings of a lovely ceiling, portrait after portrait of dead Ashworths proclaimed his centuries of clean straight lineage.

Here was a bad beginning. But his discomposure grew, when he was asked at the first meeting of the council to propose young Felix Ormond as his successor. For a moment he meditated refusal and revolt. But only for a moment. The ranks of Ormond nominees cowed him to acquiescence; he dropped behind the curtain of his indifferent pride and, with a slight sneer, did as he was bidden.

As gradually the Show itself drew nearer, he lost hope of comradeship and interest in his task. He moved mechanically about his presidential duties, to outward view a cold and haughty man, in his unhappy soul a tortured weakling. The position grew daily more difficult. With certain of the farmers he was on excellent terms. They respected his capacity, and knew him for an unaffected and generous competitor, who could forget he was a landed gentleman in sharing agricultural enthusiasms. But only one or two such farmers were members of the council, and with the appointment of stewards and other officers, the gentry outnumbered the yeomen more and more. It was not possible for Ashworth, being president, to associate with those of his colleagues that he cared for most; it was not possible for him, being the man he was, to stand congenially with the rest. Felix, in particular, with a half-veiled insolence, would not allow him to forget his strangeness in their midst. The final torture came with the day itself. This torture was to stand in front of all the crowd of onlookers, and, one of a group of men, but at the same time a solitary, to play the president and judge. With every half-hour of his ordeal, his manner became more rigid and his response to greetings more repellent. By afternoon he was a jangle of raw nerves. The jumping class was due. Together with his fellow judge—and he detested Felix more than any man alive—he forced himself to the centre of the arena, round which the varied jumps were set. It was soon evident that victory lay between Lean's horse and that which Ashworth, like most other people, regarded as Felix' own. "He shall not have it!" Ashworth told himself; and, as the entries one by one went lolloping through their tests, he kept the jingle chanting in his head: "He shall not have it, have it, have it; he shall not have the jumping prize." One by one the competitors fell away. Three times the two survivors faced the tests and strove for mastery. Ashworth, as still the issue tarried in indecision, felt his own resolution growing. He would in this way at any rate assert himself; the prize should go to Lean. But his ill-luck relentlessly pursued and took him. When for once he had the strength to dominate, occasion failed. The fourth test brought the Ormond horse badly to grief. Whether from bad riding or from the beast's fatigue, it stumbled at one jump and refused another. Ashworth's last opportunity had crumbled. No judge was needed to tell the throng that Lean had won.

And then to the tent where, solitary in the crowd of gentlemen, he took his brandy and soda, came news of the disaster and appeals for intervention. His fleeting moment of decisiveness was past. Nervously he faced this new unlooked-for crisis. " Just my luck ! " he cursed, as, half leading the group of anxious stewards and half pushed along by them, he sought the scene of the catastrophe—" Just my luck to have an accident, this of all years ! " Of his demeanour toward the angry shouting mob of farmers, grooms and hangers-on, the story told by the two visitors from Laffeter was fair enough. Ashworth, with the unsteady violence of a man more unsure even of himself than of the cause he has to judge, interrogated, threatened, pleaded for coherent evidence. When Martindale stepped forward, he welcomed the quiet good sense of the new witness' manner; but the next moment, when Felix whispered in his ear, he lost his nerve again, and from the inclination to believe and favour Martindale swung to the other extreme of arrogant suspicion. At last, in despair and not from policy, he broke off the conference and promised later judgment. The moment he had made the pledge he knew it for absurd. He seemed to hear the suppressed mockery of those about him at the ungainly vanity that set up a sudden court-leet in the Fleddon Drill Hall. What, when that promised hour arrived, should he or could he say ? Instinctively he began to cast about for channels of escape. Felix joined him.

"I say, Ashworth," he began, "I was sorry to interrupt like that and I don't like to blackguard a feller in his absence, but I think I ought to warn you not to give too much credence to that chap Martindale. We know him only too well here in Fleddon, and he's a bad lot."

Despite his dislike of Felix, Ashworth was by now so near distraction, so miserably conscious of his ineffectiveness, that he felt almost flattered by the young man's notice.

"A bad lot? Is he though? Of course, I know nothing of him. Never saw him in my life to the best of my knowledge. What's wrong with him?"

Felix pursed his lips and seemed to weigh his words.

"Well—he's—he's—you know those agitator fellers who go round saying every clodhopper is as good as a gentleman? That's his line—stirring up the small farmers and labourers. Oh, we have a lot of trouble with him."

Ashworth was only less frightened of aggressive poverty than of insolent wealth.

"Ah!" he said wisely. "That's bad. They're a danger, these people."

"And there's another thing," continued Felix hurriedly "—a trifle, maybe, but it helps. You know Crossley? There—yonder—the man standing with his shoulder hunched. You don't? Oh, he comes from Maull—Lypiatt's place, y'know. Well, he has just been telling me that he arrived late, after the jumping was over, and happened to come by the place where the winner was being tested. The accident had just happened. Crossley was mixed up with the crowd, and heard Martindale say to the fellow next him (this is what he told me, y'know) that Slatter ought to be paid for this in his own coin. 'In his own coin,' mark you! That's not quite the line he took speaking to you, is it?"

"Indeed not," returned Ashworth. "Most contradictory, most contradictory. I don't like the sound of that at all."

"Of course," pursued Felix in a casual voice, "he has a grudge against Slatter. That accounts partly for his speaking like that."

"A grudge? In what way?"

"Oh, it's a long tale. But he got hold of Lean—the horse's owner, y'know—and persuaded him to show Slatter the door, and give him the charge of the horse. Professional jealousy, y'know. He doesn't like Greensmith having our custom at the Park, and Slatter is Greensmith's man."

"Ah," observed Ashworth knowingly. "Stealing clients, eh? I see; I see. And the man Slatter, Ormond? I think you spoke up for him out there, didn't you?"

"Slatter? Yes, I did, and I will again. He's had bad luck, has Slatter, and he's not much to look at. But he's an honest chap, and would as soon think of playing a devil's trick like that on a horse——! Slatter, indeed! No, Ashworth, if you are suspecting *him*, I do beg you to put it out of your head. In my view the whole thing is a regrettable accident. These things *will* happen. Some farmers are so damned careless with their wire and have rubbish heaps in any odd corner. I'm sorry for Lean; devilish sorry. But there's no scandal in it; not an atom. They make a drama of anything, some of these chaps. Suspicious! You wouldn't believe it. *I* know, of course, what the Fleddon farmers are like. Maybe, they are more sensible up your way. But take my advice and don't get mixed up in it. You'll be lied to and pestered and God knows where it will all end."

Some other gentlemen had now approached and, hearing the last sentences from Felix, approved his view. One and all they recommended the president to stand aloof. If at the last he consented to do so, it was less from conviction than in obedience to his own longing to be free from this unhappy Show and all that appertained to it. He sent a message to Lean's friends, pleading an urgent and unexpected call to Ashworth Hall; he would be kept informed of what (if anything) occurred; he believed (and hoped) the unlucky business was an accident, and felt convinced that Mr. Lean (with whom he personally and those associated with him felt the deepest sympathy) would see the wisdom of deferring public inquiry until minds were calmer.

Then he crept out to his carriage and was driven rapidly away.

II

That night in Fleddon the Ormond Arms was quiet and comfortable and drowsy. It was the "blue" house, where the solid yeomen from among Sir Harry's tenantry mingled with the chief shopkeepers of the town and sighed over the decay of England. To Burrows, Fleddon's boot maker; and to old Alderson, the saddler; to Buck, the grocer ; to Houldsworth, the apothecary; to the Abbey verger, and to half a dozen more, Britain was in an evil state and ordained society upon the brink of ruin. Before long no man would be able to bid his servant go or come with certainty of obedience or even of civility.

"There are no more 'men' or 'women' now," growled Alderson. "Only last night the boy comes in to me to say a gentleman from Varley Edge had called for Mitchell's harness. A 'gentleman,' mind you, and outside in the street was one of the louts from Mitchell's farm! Ugh!—the country's finished. If it lasts my time I'll be lucky. You young chaps——" here he jerked his head gloomily toward the portly shape of Craik the seed merchant who, having succeeded an octogenarian father at the age of fifty-two, was one of the young guard of Fleddon Toryism, "You youngsters, Craik, will have the bad times—mark my words."

"Ay, y're right, Mr. Alderson——." The words came rumbling from Matthew Barr, at once the bulkiest and most extensive farmer of the countryside. "Y're right! My missus tells me the same o' the wenches in the dairy. It's 'Ai've a right,' and 'you've no right' all the time nowadays. Why, when ai was a lad, them girls 'd work all night if need be in the busy seasons. Now they're too big for their clogs, and must be dressin' up in feathers every Sunday, prancin' the lanes in likeness of their betters."

A newcomer to the private bar drew eyes. It was old Greensmith, Sir Harry's vet, a gentle white-haired man who leant unsteadily upon a stick.

"Evenin', Mr. Greensmith."

"Evenin', Greensmith. What news?"

The greetings came like desultory coughing from the corners of the room. Greensmith in his accustomed chair called for his usual steaming drink. Talk became general, and in the near happenings of the afternoon the distant threat of revolution was forgotten.

Already and before Greensmith came, the incident that marred the Show had been full half a dozen times narrated, hawed over, judged and counter-judged. But all felt that finality was out of reach till the old man arrived, with whose trade and knowledge it had most direct concern.

"I didn't see you on the field, Mr. Greensmith, when Lean's horse took the fall."

"I had gone home, Burrows. It keeps me standing round longer than an old man should, this business of a Show. But I heard about it. A bad business, a bad business. Poor George Lean, to lose a valuable horse!"

"Lose it?" asked one of his audience. "Is the horse bad then?"

The old vet shook his head.

"I fear so," he said. "The cuts were terrible and two in particular—so they tell me—punctured the knee and hock joints. I haven't seen the animal, of course. Lean is not now a client of mine; but I was told."

"Young Mr. Ormond spoke up for that man Slatter o' yours," observed Barr. "Ai 'eard 'im. They were for putting the blame on 'im. You 'eard that, Mr. Greensmith?"

The vet nodded.

"I am greatly distressed by the whole thing," he said quietly. "Indeed, I prefer not to discuss it. Slatter came to me with Mr. Ormond's recommendation. I know nothing against him, but there seems to have been unpleasantness ever since he came. He has quarrelled with Martindale. That is foolish. Martindale is a nice young fellow, and there should be room for both of us. Why will folk quarrel? Surely it is more pleasant if we live in peace!"

"Well, you've done *your* best, Mr. Greensmith," said Craik. "That much is certain. There's no one 'as done so much for pleasant relationships in Fleddon as you 'ave."

To the murmur of approval the old vet bent his head in gratified acknowledgment.

"Thank you, gentlemen. Thank you. And now let us talk of something else but this unlucky afternoon."

III

The rival tavern to the Ormond Arms lay by the riverside. It was the "yellow" house, and called the Ball and Cross. In contrast to the unflinching Toryism of the tap-room in the market-square, the Ball and Cross was radical enough. Yet, judged more broadly, it was a mild and theoretic Radicalism that was gravely—and sometimes keenly—canvassed behind the curtains of the private bar. The real division between the patrons of the Ormond Arms and those who gathered at the Ball and Cross was, in fact, less political than social, for it was that perpetual division between the party of a great house and its opponents. The Ormond Arms were for Sir Harry, for Fleddon Park, and (incidentally) for the Establishment; the Ball and Cross, predominantly Nonconformist, were for Reform, and vociferated (louder, maybe, than they really meant) against the influence of landlordism over minds and votes. Apart from this the two groups were greatly similar. Their individual members were of comfortable means; all, at a crisis, would prefer their equals or their betters to the lower class. There was no more of fraternising with the labourer on Glaive-side than in the market-place, and Clayton, the Baptist ironmonger, could rail against the inefficiency and the encroachments of his shop assistants as bitterly as ever Alderson or Burrows had been known to do.

But on this evening of the Show day the split between the tavern parliaments was deep indeed. Everything had combined to bring the prejudices of the Ball and Cross to angry emphasis. Further, the occasion being an exceptional one and the town full of a vague good fellowship, the usual clientele at the "yellow" inn was swollen by unaccustomed and even by revolutionary elements. Two woollen mills still worked in Fleddon, and among the hands were several fluent malcontents, who readily expressed hatred of capital and privilege and clamoured for the triumph of the working-man. The most extreme and talented of these, a foreman with experience of Rodbury agitators, actually invaded the tap-room of the Ball and Cross and brought a comrade with him. At any other time such effrontery would have enraged the prosperous radical frequenters of the inn as greatly as a similar invasion of the Ormond Arms (if such were conceivable) would have infuriated the Fleddon Tories. But this night was Show night and, in addition, all those who, mildly or violently, were opposed to Ormond influence, were by the happenings of the afternoon for the time being united.

Of course the accident was the one topic of discussion and not a feature of that terrible affair but whipped the passions of the "left" in Fleddon to a frenzy. In the first place the chief sufferer, Lean himself, was one of the leaders of opinion at the Ball and Cross; and Lean, who had beaten Ormond at the game of horse-breeding, had seen his victory turned by an evil hazard to the worst conceivable defeat. This was not all. Lean's triumph had, as everybody knew, been tantamount to a successful sale of the prize-winning horse to monied Marrowden. But now, with his treasure wounded and (some said) never to jump again, he had lost his money and, more mortifying still, must likely see it pass to the very Ormond he had conquered. Finally, there was strong cause to fear that Ormond influence had quashed inquiry into what all Lean's friends regarded as a most sinister catastrophe. So, first and last, the spur to anti-Ormond feeling had dug deep.

" 'Twere done a' purpose, Jarge. Any fool can see it."

" Ye'll 'ave the laar of them, Jarge Lean? The case is sure."

" That damned sneakin' swine o' Greensmith's planned it all. What'll we do to 'im? "

" 'E were paid to do it by young Ormond."

" Ay! It's Ormond doin'. Ye saw t' young squoire whisper t'Ashworth? "

The men broke into angry murmuring. The murmurs became cries; the brandy bottle passed and passed again. Faces aflush with anger and with spirits pressed closer to a ring of indignation. Only George Lean, the injured man, was cool—far cooler than his friends. He sat apart, his head sunk broodingly, an empty clay between his lips. Now and again he growled a protest when words of special violence sprang from the snarling murmur of the crowd that gathered by the lamp.

" Nay, nay," he said. " Ye talk wildly. And you in particular, Amos Duff, who preach o' Sundays against the spirit o' revenge! I am surprised to hear ye forget your noble precepts! "

Duff flushed a little redder.

" We 'ave the word o' God for righteous wrath, George Lean. A scoundrel has done ye an evil turn and it is duty to our fellow-men to punish 'im."

"But are ye sure enough?" asked Lean. "Who saw the man do anything?"

"*Ai* did. *Ai* see'd 'im," cried a new voice, and all present turned to see young farmer Mellon, the very man who first had begged of Frank to undertake the charge of the now crippled horse.

"You see'd 'im? What did ye see?"

"Tell us!"

"Ai knew it."

"The dirty swine!"

Vastly important, Mellon found a seat and with impressive gesture told his tale. He had been walking early in the morning along a narrow lane that ran behind the cottages where Slatter lived. Over the wall had come the sound of broken glass swept by a broom together. Curiosity had tempted him to peep between the coping stones, and he had seen Slatter sweeping into a pile fragments of broken bottles, shards and china.

A growl of savage pleasure greeted this narrative. But George Lean laughed.

"It's a far cry from Slatter's backyard to under the bank in Evans' field! Why mustn't the poor devil clear up his rubbish, Mellon? Bottles and crockery break as much in a vet's house as any other!"

At this more than one cried out impatiently.

"Damn it, Lean, ye are the last man to make excuses for the cad who 'as destroyed your 'orse!"

"Ye are a fool, Abbott! I make no excuses. But I'll not be mixed up with mob-law unless I'm sure of my facts. Martindale doesn't say Slatter did it. Ye heard him speak to Mr. Ashworth on the field. He never mentioned the thing as possible."

One or two of the men present, jealous perhaps of gentleman allies, growled in dispraise of Martindale.

"Ai 'eard 'im say sumthin' very diff'rent afoër Ashworth come," said one.

"Ay, ay!" they chorussed. "'E was main angry at the start. Ye weren't by then, Jarge Lean. Ask Purser! 'E'll tell ye."

Then another:

"For what 'e changed his tune t' Ashworth no one can say but 'imself. Laike to laike, mebbe."

Lean turned fiercely on the murmurers.

"Hold ye tongues, ye ——s! As for you, Mister what's-yer-name from Collins' mill, ye don't b'long here, and we don't want your opinion. Frank Martindale is a friend o' mine, and it's to him I owe that the horse won at all. If there's a man here to hint that Martindale would lie to please young Ormond—or the old man either—he insults not only Martindale, but me as well! Speak up, then? Who says so?"

There was a sullen pause. Burrows, as befitted one of the elders of the party, spoke soothingly.

" There, there—we have no call to quarrel among ourselves. I propose that a deputation go to Ashworth Hall and see Mister Ashworth in person. He's a just man, though of a changeable temper. How for that? You agree, George Lean, that more inquiry should be made? "

" Ay, ay! " muttered Lean, who had sunk back into his moody listlessness. " I'll be glad to know all there is to know."

The party fell into low-toned discussion; but those who had been most violent drew apart and, after whispering together, rose and slunk out into the dark street.

IV

While friends and enemies and fellow townsmen gathered in bars to fret and pick about the tangled threads of the day's one sensation, Frank sat at home and pondered moodily. He had reached his mother's cottage about eight o'clock and, barely responding to her greeting, had flung his hat and jacket on to the bench and hurried out again into the little garden. Through the window she could see him wield his pick-axe on a patch of hard neglected ground with all the false energy of grief. She knew enough of men to forbear questioning at moments such as these; she knew enough of supper to have faith in its diplomacy.

When, later in the evening and the meal over, Frank with pipe alight had perched himself upon the water-butt beside the cottage door, she ventured conversation.

"You didn't wait about for me on the field this afternoon, I hope? I slipped off. You guessed that I had come home?"

He nodded.

"I know your little ways," he said.

The mother worked in silence. She used to love this twilight hour after the work was done, when she could settle into the corner of the high-backed bench, her knitting on her knee, and know that her tall son, perched on his water-butt, was equally at peace. Even to-night the scented stillness of the shadowy garden soothed the anxieties that lately crowded in her mind—or so at least (desperately eager as she was for a recapture of the old quiet happiness that had been theirs) she told herself. But in her heart of hearts she knew things were not now as formerly; could never be again as once they were. At intervals she could hear Frank's heels tap softly on the barrel's side; time was when neither care nor anger set his brain quivering nor jerked the muscles of his dangling legs. Here, then, was just another tiny sign of the disquiet that held him and, holding him, possessed her also. In the darkness she compressed her lips and with an unbreathed sigh prayed to the beauty of the night for comfort and for wisdom.

Indeed her difficulty was serious. How might she guide her son, while seeming only to advise? The case was doubly hard, as Mrs. Martindale now realised that the troubles all related to his love for Catherine. Ever since the ill-starred passion woke within him, he had been a different man. At once exalted and forlorn, his gaiety had become excitement and his gravity a sadness. For a while the change had puzzled. She knew him over-strained but knew not why; until that afternoon when he had rushed from the tea-table to find this Catherine and, as he crossed the threshold, had promised that his mother should later hear all there was to hear. From that day she had understood; from that day she had borne her share in his anxieties and the grave burden of her own as well. On that revealing day, when he returned from Fleddon Park (and long she had to wait before he came), he had been brief in his confession but quite open with her. Proudly he had declared his love for Catherine and proudly claimed her love for him. Then he had paused, as though awaiting caution or reproof. The mother could not bring herself to speak in warning or in blame. He was so joyful and so wretched in his grievous happiness; he knew so well his treasure's value, gauged with such accurate despair the strong locks that guarded it. A mother must find ways to help, not words of stale reproach or vain foreboding.

It never crossed her mind to try for her own sake to strangle this unlucky love affair. Frank was her life, but she could not be his. He saw contentment now only in Catherine Ormond's smile and dreamed of happiness in her embrace; wherefore Frank's mother must become Catherine's mother also, and toss uneasily at nights searching for means to give her children joy.

When Catherine went to Laffeter, there flashed indeed a hope that separation might distract the wayward fancy of a young untravelled girl. But Frank became so quickly the more haggard for her absence that Mrs. Martindale, to see him smile again, stifled disloyal inclinations, and even prayed to the God of maiden-constancy to keep this Catherine in steadfastness.

During the days before the Show Frank had spoken often of the progress of Lean's horse and, in enthusiasm for its chances, had returned to something like his normal self. To please him, Mrs. Martindale had accompanied him to the field and had rejoiced to see the victory that Frank had worked for and had largely won. "He will be gay to-night," she told herself contentedly, and hurried home before him to prepare a meal worthy the triumph. But the moment that he entered the cottage on his return, she knew some fresh disaster had occurred. She made no sign, but set her teeth and steadied her composure against their after-supper talk.

In the darkness the pale flowers hovered moth-like. The scent of stocks and of the mass of tall tobacco-plants beneath the parlour window drugged her pain with generous sweetness. Her needles clicked recurrently, and as the strip of knitting grew, it slipped from her knee and dangled earthwards. Frank shifted restlessly, his heels tapping the metal band that encircled the water-butt. She knew that he would speak, and almost held her breath the more controlledly to answer him. Yet his words, when indeed they came, broke her self-possession.

"Mums," he said. "We must leave Fleddon. I am going next week."

"Oh!" The cry was out before she was aware that she had uttered it. "Leave Fleddon, Frank?"

"It's no use," he muttered. "It's no use! Everything combines to point the way. I am beaten at last. Listen. You have not yet heard what happened at the Show this evening?"

Briefly he told the tale that in the same hour twenty men in Fleddon were narrating.

"I have dragged my friends into disaster now!" he concluded bitterly. "Lean would have had justice, if *I* had not been concerned. As it is, young Ormond, just to damage me——"

The sentence died away in something like a groan. Mrs. Martindale reached out and laid a quiet hand on his knee.

"Courage, dear Frank. Do not let bad luck move you more than it should. There must be more inquiry. Mr. Ashworth is a just man——"

"Just! Maybe he is. But he was *frightened,* mother. I watched him on the field and he was frightened. He dare not go against the Ormond party. No one in this grovelling neighbourhood dare think a thought that is not courtesy to Fleddon Park. Why, by living in this very house we live on Ormond bounty! I told the factor so this evening—and he laughed!"

"The factor? What do you mean? When did you see him?"

"I called on my way home—to give notice we were leaving."

"Frank! How could you act so rashly and say nothing! Just for a whim of disappointment to throw away——oh, to throw away everything! Where will you go? You are not so innocent as to think that a vet's practice can grow overnight! Oh Frank. What folly is this?"

"No folly, mother. Believe me, it is wisdom. There will be no peace now for me in Fleddon. That for my own part I could bear. But I will not bring others into my private griefs, and I know something of young Ormond. He is a pitiless enemy, mums, and he will strike at my friends for being my friends. I am a danger in a community such as this. For the sake of other folks, I am better away."

"What is the truth about the horse?"

"How can I tell?"

"But you have ideas, Frank?"

He did not quickly answer. When he spoke his voice was argumentative.

"Is it unreasonable to have ideas? One thing is certain—that horse of Lean's was being deliberately lowered, when I took over charge of it. Why? The man responsible was a nominee of Ormond's, and Ormond's horse was the only dangerous competitor. Surely it is not straining facts to put two and two together?"

"But Mr. Greensmith, Frank—— He is not the man to do such a thing!"

"Greensmith! It is nothing to do with Greensmith. He is straight; but this cad Slatter——! Well, faces tell tales as well as tongues."

"So you suspect Slatter? Do others also?"

"Do they not? They nearly lynched him on the field, and serve him right, I say! I'd be glad to have my own hands on him for the swine he is, whatever he may or may not have done in this last affair."

"Hush, Frank! You talk wildly! Suppose some other person heard you speak like that! But even if Slatter is all you think him, why must we leave our home? Are we to be driven away by an ill-conditioned nobody?"

"Oh, that!" he relapsed into abstracted murmuring. "It is not for Slatter that we must go. For Felix Ormond a little; but not at all for Slatter."

She sat a moment silent, rocking her body gently to and fro.

"Then it is not only this business of George Lean?" she said.

"Not only that," he agreed.

And again was silence. At last:

"What did you tell the factor?" she inquired.

"I told him that we would vacate this cottage in six months; that I was going away immediately, and would return to fetch you when our new home was ready."

"Our new home!" she echoed bitterly. "And where will that be, pray?"

He patted her shoulder cheerfully.

"Nay, nay! It is you that must have courage, darling! You are afraid that I shall bring you to misery? Indeed not. We shall come through it, mumsie, and be happier than even we have been at Fleddon."

"Where will you go, then, first of all?"

"To London."

She had resumed her knitting, but now the needles chattered unsteadily in hands that shook. There was another pause:

"And if the girl's heart breaks, Frank?"

He moved impatiently. Almost she felt his anger rise. The answer came roughly:

"Mine will have broken first."

Then he burst out, pleading, inarticulate:

"But will she more than grieve a little, mumsie? Is it not kinder to her and more true to myself? She *must* suffer so long as I am here. A little suffering when all is over, what is it? She is so young. She has seen no one. Will she not forget and laugh again? 'If her heart breaks!' And I would die to save her the smallest pain! Mums, what must I do? No—I *have* done. It is too late to change. But say that I am right! Say it was braver to be cruel than—oh, than to hang on and be known for the backdoor lover of the squire's daughter and drag her down and—then, in the end to have to yield and slink away . . . !"

"Dear Frank," she said. "These questions of courage in love are things of torment. But remember this: If it is hard for you—who *can* act, who are expected to act—how much harder is it for the woman who can only sit and wait? A woman loves and, having said she loves, must nurse her longings and endure in patience till her lover comes and claims her. Women who act in other ways are light, Frank. I do not know Miss Ormond, save by frequent sight and from your praise of her. But she is a *true* woman, unless a face lies as I do not believe it can. If she is what I think her, she is calm in that grand house yonder because she trusts you, and because she knows that you are trustworthy. Is it fair, without a word to slip away? Were you to hear to-morrow that she had thrown you over and pledged herself to some one else, you would be hurt and angry. And you would be right. But she will be more hurt and with more right, if you desert her now and tell her afterwards it was for her sake that you did it! Women prefer the sacrifices they make themselves to those that are made for them. She has done a brave thing to give her love to you and you do not need me to tell you of the compliment she pays in doing so. Is not *her* first unshrinking courage—so long as she stands by it—to have priority over *your* second thoughts? If you are set on this departure—and it may well be, that so far as young Mr. Ormond is concerned you are justified in your decision—I would rather you sought the girl out and told her all and—and—and even——"

She broke off.

"And even what, mother?" he queried softly.

Mrs. Martindale steadied herself. She must think carefully before she spoke. Then, quietly and with gravity:

"——and even asked her to come away with you," she said.

He slipped from the barrel-top, and sitting beside her, hugged her tight.

"Oh, mums!" he said. "I hoped and prayed you would say that! I have thought of it and thought, and always something whispered that it was cowardice to bring her to my poverty, to ask her to share my risks of failure. But now you bid me do it! Adorable you are, you desperate thing!"

"Oh, Frank, you're stifling me! There, there! But listen, dear. This thing is serious. I am only trying to be fair to Catherine. It is *very* likely that she will hesitate; and if she hesitates you must not press her. A man can persuade a woman who loves him to any recklessness or folly; the more incumbent on him is it to use persuasion sparingly."

"I see, mums," he said. "As always, you are right. I shall take a walk along the river bank and think things over. To-morrow we will talk again. Now go to bed, like a good little mother. It is late. Good-night, dearest."

V

Like a hungry man who has drunk wine instead of eating bread, Frank wandered in a torpid ecstasy beside the river. There was no moon. Elusive in the darkness flickered the starlight. It seemed to shine upon the very border of his range of vision, but when he turned his head to catch its gleaming, only the darkness drooped and covered him, and the faint star-sheen fluttered impishly distant as ever. As tantalising and as nimble in escape was his new happiness. At one moment he would imagine Catherine his own and in some distant place they two at peace. But let him try to dress the vision in reality, its brightness dimmed, and with each veil of actuality it became more sombre. It was one thing (he would tell himself) to speak of love's triumphant flight; another for that flight to triumph. He had no fear of furious pursuit, of angry father or of lawyer's threats. Deep in his heart he had no doubt of Catherine's response to such appeal as he could make to her. But should he make it? How would it be with him if life ran wryly, and for love's sake she came to stringency? How would he bear the sight of her, that was so happy and so confident in life's gentleness, sink slowly to an anxious drudge? All the old arguments that had, when first he played with the idea of runaway, crowded in righteous warning on his mind, recurred to torture him, until he bowed his head beneath their urgency. All was despair and gloom. Once had renunciation shone with a pale glory of its own; but now the future was one darkness.

And at this moment of most black debasement the pendulum would swing and slowly move towards excited hope again. His mother's words would echo in his ears. If *she* could urge him to carry Catherine away, then was such fierce extremity his duty. If *she* could brush aside prudence and suitability and lend her grave wisdom to the cause of "all-for-love," then was that cause his cause and he its slave. Excitement grew. He flung his head toward the wanton stars and in imagination felt the carriage sway and heard the hoofs that thudded on the road to freedom. To steal his love and, having stolen, to hold fast—that was a man's work. Was he a weakling that he could not feed and warm the girl that he had won? His fevered brain leapt dizzily from venturous pride to arrogance. He that could wrest his mistress from the jealousy of caste could surely wrest a livelihood from an indifferent world? Higher and higher yet would mount self-confidence until, as formerly the depths, so now the highest peak was passed, and down again the ugly slope would lead, through scruple and hesitation to distrust, and downward still to hopelessness.

So absorbed was he in alternations of audacity and foreboding that he lost sense of time and almost of direction. On setting out, he had left the town behind him and followed the well-trodden path that, crossing stiles and little bridges, kept close beside the river. At one point of his walk he had crossed the Glaive—where a broad ferry-boat with a wire rope gave individual opportunity—and more by hazard than by design had turned toward Fleddon once again. With something of surprise he found himself among the hovels of Marsh Town—the despised transpontine Fleddon that has since become so pink a villadom—and realised that midnight was not long ahead. He reached Fleddon Bridge and stood a moment above the central pier to look about him. It was the turn of melancholy, when honour meant relinquishment of happiness. He told himself that he was looking almost for the last time upon a scene so familiar that its features stood out in the night-time as clearly as though the sun were shining. Under his feet the river softly flowed between irregular and mellow houses; the little wharf belonging to the flour-mill lay up-stream to the right; beyond the roofs of riverside cottages, beyond the steep-pitched gables of the Drill Hall, beyond the tall buildings set about the market-place, the Abbey tower was watching proudly over Fleddon. As always, the thought of this serene and perfect tower was to Frank Martindale a thought of Catherine. His heart leapt, but fell again, as in his imagined survey of beloved Fleddon—a survey that transcended darkness—he passed from Abbey tower to Ormond Gate. Into his private bitterness crept something of a general resentment at the immense injustice of the English social scheme. The Abbey, that had stood for centuries, welcomed beneath its lovely vaulted roof the poor, the suffering and the wicked; the gate house of the Park—that blatant lump of yesterday—admitted only those whose worldly consequence or meek servility gave cause for traffic with Sir Harry's home. And yet the gate was stronger than the tower, for Ormond vanity could set limit to man's happiness where, in the eyes of God, no limit was.

Frank groaned and, turning quickly, made his way toward the town. In that desolate hour he was indeed not very different from the embittered leveller that Felix Ormond had so frivolously termed him.

Street lighting in a small country town is even nowadays a primitive affair, and in the 'sixties was more modest still. After eleven o'clock only the gas lamp in the market-place was left alight, so that the road between the bridge head and the Square was, as Frank passed along, as dark as the night's self. And quiet. He listened idly to the echo of his own footsteps down the silent road, counting their sequence as with surprising noise they rattled back at him from the wall opposite. But suddenly a hoarse scream and the thud of heavy blows brought him up short. The sounds came from behind the houses to his right. There was another cry, a scuffle, and the noise of running feet that faded quickly into silence. Frank ran to where a narrow alley led off from the street in the direction whence the sounds had come. Without hesitation, but stepping cautiously, he plunged into the blackness of this lane. He had not gone far before a low moaning gave him pause. He listened carefully. Again the faint sound of pain and, this time, the dragging rustle of an uneasy movement told him of something living but in agony. By great good fortune, instinct had led him, on leaving home, to slip into his pocket the small folding lantern that he was accustomed to take with him when called out at night. This lantern he now lit and once again advanced. The flickering light shone on the cobbled alley floor and, the next moment, on a tumbled human heap. Frank knelt by the side of the wounded man who, roused from the lethargy of pain by the sudden gleam of the lantern, slightly turned his head. It was Slatter. He lay all knotted and uncouth. His face was terribly disfigured, and blood streamed from what appeared to be a maze of cuts.

"Good God!" cried Frank beneath his breath. "The man's half killed!"

He set the lantern on the stones, and with his arm raised the wretched man a little from the ground. Then with his handkerchief made such shift of bandaging as he was able.

"Keep still," he said. "I won't hurt you more than I can help. Turn a little. You are all twisted. There—are you hurt anywhere else? Could you walk if I supported you?"

Slatter seemed dazed and merely blinked stupidly at the lantern-flame. He then turned his eyes on Frank and for a while stared him with animal torpor in the face. This fixed unmeaning gaze was hard to meet composedly, and Frank wondered if, without causing unnecessary pain, he could lift the man in his arms and set him in greater comfort against the alley wall. He was bracing himself to the task, when heavy footsteps caused him to look up. Down the lane from the street, and carrying a large lantern in his hand, came the bulky figure of a man. He was a being who, unofficially but with the silent sanction of years and by virtue of his great strength rather than of his intelligence, held a strange medley of positions in the life of Fleddon. On Sundays he blew the organ in the Abbey church; he was acknowledged "chucker-out" at any gathering in need of such a functionary; he kept the "gate" on Show days and at the athletic sports; he rolled the cricket pitch; he had been known to earn good money by spotting welshers at the Clanworth races. His arrival at the present juncture brought great relief to Frank. As the man lumbered nearer he called out:

"Jenkins, you're the very man I want! There's been dirty work here. Help me carry this fellow home—or, better still—wait with him while I fetch a doctor."

Jenkins, with his small eyes half hidden in the huge circle of his face, stood without answering. He looked the wounded man over from head to foot; then slowly turned and scrutinised Frank Martindale.

"It's Mr. Martindale," he said finally.

Frank stifled an impatient word. He could not rise while Slatter lay against his arm; he knew the cumbrous mother-wit of Jenkins but too well.

"Yes," he said, "it's me all right. And this is Mr. Greensmith's assistant—Mr. Slatter. He's badly hurt. I can't leave go of him or lift him without your help. Do you take his feet and we will set him against the wall. Then I will hurry for a doctor, while you stay here. We will then go to the police.

Once again there was silence, while Jenkins brought his mind to bear on these too swiftly uttered words. At last and deliberately he set his lantern on the ground. Then scratched his head. Frank's patience snapped.

"For God's sake, man, use your wits! Don't you see this poor chap is hurt? Help me lift him!"

And then it was that Slatter spoke. He did not move; but quite clearly and with a deadly evenness of tone addressed the watchman.

"Don't forget, Mister Jenkins, that yer found me 'ere and, by me, one of them what did me in."

The surprise was so great that Frank almost let his burden fall. He turned in blank astonishment and was about to speak, when he met Slatter's eyes, that were no longer dull and meaningless but alight with a malign intelligence. The evil message of those eyes checked speech, and he could only return the stare of the wounded man with an amazement that was already quick with fear.

Jenkins seemed hardly to have heard the victim's words. In truth he could not grasp more than one meaning at a time, and he had now just apprehended Frank's request for help in moving the shattered creature to a more comfortable posture.

"Ai'll 'elp 'e lift un," he announced.

But when Slatter was safely set against the wall and Frank was stretching his cramped muscles, Jenkins, without change of countenance, reached a further stage on his slow road to understanding. He produced a large silver watch, carefully observed the time:

"Five minutes afoër twelve," he said solemnly, "and Mister Slatter 'avin' bin gravely assaarlted by Mister Martindale——"

Frank interrupted this rehearsal of the bumpkin's evidence.

"Jenkins," he said quietly, "listen to me. This man is hurt and ill. A doctor must be brought, and when Slatter is being rightly attended to, we will go the station and tell the police all we know of this business. Now stay here, like a good fellow. I'll be back in ten minutes.

Slatter, who had cried out with pain at being moved and for a few moments had lain with closed eyes against the wall, now suddenly revived once more. This time he spoke more like himself:

" 'E'll make off, Jenkins. Don't let the —— go. You've caught 'im pretty. Carry me to the b—— doctor yourself, Jenkins; you're strong enough—strong as a b—— 'oss, y'are, Jenkins—and a dam' sight stronger than *one* 'oss I know ! "

The chuckle was so bestial that Frank had to turn away and clench his fists, else would he have forgotten that the wretch was at his mercy and have served him as he would have served a healthy enemy.

Jenkins began rolling up the sleeves of his jacket.

" Us'll carry 'im to t' doctor, Mister Martindale."

And bending down, he picked Slatter up in his arms as easily as though he had been a child.

" Do 'ee take me lantern, Mister Martindale, an' your'n also and go in front. Then ai'll see me road."

It was a queer procession. First Frank, so furious yet so desperately controlled that he could hardly set a reasonable pace, but felt that he must kick his legs or run or stamp; and then the solid bulk of Jenkins—expressionless, inexorable—bearing as burden a crumpled sneering thing, that now would whimper with the pain of sudden movement and now chuckle audibly. The lanterns, swung in Frank's quivering hands, sent long unsteady rays to left and right, so that where now was blackness shone the next moment littered cobble stones or the rough plaster of a cottage wall, which forthwith vanished into pitch-dark again. Slowly they moved along the alley to the street and made their way toward the nearest doctor's house.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I

The maiming of Lean's horse became the gossip of the three counties overnight. But the tale of the assault on Slatter had not, a short week after the event, reached Laffeter; for the inmates of that house were, at the moment and by chance, abnormally removed from knowledge of the outer world. On the day following the Show the house-party had broken up. Frocester and his brothers had left home in search of other partridge-shooting than their own. The Duchess of Severn and Claudia, due for a round of visits in the south and west, had also left; and Charlotte, wishful to be home in a few days but not desiring to remain at Laffeter, had for the brief interval of time accompanied them. The Duke, Lucretia and Lucretia's dearest Catherine alone remained. Such a household had few contacts with the outside world and felt no need of them. The old gentleman spent his time in leather gaiters and a well-worn coat making the round on foot of his accessible farms, helping the farmers with their harvest, talking interminably and with immense content those agricultural technicalities that were his hobby and their livelihood. Now and again he would pass the whole day thistle-cutting in the park, or with a game-keeper range the woods and make his plans for winter clearances. The two girls, left to themselves, seldom wandered beyond the gates, but stitched and chattered, rambled about the grounds, sang songs and played duets and romped with Rex, and in occasional fits of childishness ran races down the shining corridors, till the great house was filled with the forlorn echoes of their laughter and the sharp barking of the little dog. The weekly local paper, when it came, lay undisturbed upon the library-table, and was at last engulfed into the servants' hall.

But if no eagerness were felt for printed news, Catherine at least watched the posts for tidings of another kind. As time passed and no reply came to that most daring letter, written in fervour after the story of the Show had come to Laffeter, the shadow of anxiety fell upon her gaiety.

" I can't understand it, Lou. He must have had my letter days ago."

" Perhaps he is away or very busy."

" No, no. Absence or work would never leave *that* letter unacknowledged. What can have happened ? Oh, I wish we were not so helpless ! '

" Write again," suggested Lucretia.

But Catherine flushed and shook her head.

"I couldn't do that. Not again! It was wicked enough to write as I did. No—I muſt juſt wait. Frank will send me word when he can."

No more was said, but Catherine's heart grew heavy. Another day of silence and she fell into dejection. Harassed and sorrowful, she found herself the following afternoon too reſtless for her work or for a quiet walk with Rex under the beech trees of the park.

"I muſt go riding, Lou," she declared. "I am all ſtrung up and miserable. Still there is no answer! You will lend me your little Sylvia? I will be kind to her and not tire her out. Besides"—mischievously—"I am, if anything, a shade the lighter!"

Lucretia pouted, acting offence.

"There! She borrows my mare and calls me fat in one breath! Did you ever! I've a mind, miss, to tell you to borrow Shanks' mare, for never a one of mine——"

Catherine laughed and begged forgiveness. In an hour's time she was cantering by the side of the carriage road that led from Laffeter house to the north-eaſtern gate-way of the park. Lucretia watched her out of sight, then crossed the formal garden and the terrace and entered the house by the French window of the morning-room.

She had opened the door that led to the main hall and was about to cross over to the ſtaircase foot, when voices apprised her that some one had rung the front door bell and was in parley with a servant. She paused and, concealed behind a pillar, awaited the visitor's departure. She heard a man's voice:

" Nor the Duchess, either ? "

" Her Grace is away from home, sir."

There was a pause. Lucretia expected to hear the door shut and to see the footman in retirement kitchenwards. Instead, with an embarrassment that even in the voice was audible, the unseen stranger said:

" I have come—the fact is that—I—I—well, I particularly wanted to speak to—to Miss Catherine Ormond. Could you tell me, please, whether she——"

Even as he spoke the truth dawned on Lucretia listening. She knew who the caller was; she was intensely anxious to see him, and staunchly an ally to his cause. Wherefore impelled at once by curiosity and by sympathy, she slipped from behind her pillar and gliding swiftly toward the open archway of the ante-hall called to the servant.

" What is it, Perry ? "

The footman turned and, stepping respectfully aside to make his answer, left the young lady face to face with Martindale. She summed him up with one quick glance, and as rapidly approved him. Not waiting for the footman's answer, she addressed the visitor.

" I heard you asking for Miss Ormond. May I know your business ? I may be able to——"

Frank bowed; then, raising his eyes to hers, looked at her squarely.

"My name is Martindale," he said, "and I have particular reason to see Miss *Catherine* Ormond."

The emphasis on the christian name threatened Lucretia's gravity. How comic if, by misadventure, the young man could have been brought with ceremony to Charlotte!

"I assumed it was Miss *Catherine* Ormond," she returned demurely. "The other Miss Ormond is not here. I am Lucretia Merrion, Mr. Martindale."

When he heard her name, he made as though to start forward; but checked himself and glanced at the impassive footman. Lucretia saw the glance.

"You may go, Perry," she said. "I will attend to Mr. Martindale."

They stood in silence while the man's heels tapped on the marble floor toward the servants' quarters. Frank spoke eagerly:

"Lady Lucretia!—You are Catherine's friend. Her letters have been full of you. She has told you all about——"

He stopped, uncomfortable for all his urgency.

"Won't you come in, Mr. Martindale? Catherine has just gone riding. Papa is out. I am very glad to see you. Yes—she has told me—well, a lot of things."

"You will let me thank you for what you

have done to cheer her?" he asked, as side by side they walked across the hall. "She is the bravest girl that ever was, but things are cruel for her, and with you she is not lonely."

Lucretia led him to a small drawing-room, where was no danger of disturbance.

"I need no thanks, Mr. Martindale. Cathy is my dearest friend and I want to see her happy. But why do you not answer her letters? She is grieved and worried. What has been happening?"

He stood before her, holding his hat and riding crop. "He is very handsome," she thought, stealing a glance, "and his mouth is kind. I like him."

"Alas, Lady Lucretia! Many things are happening and I must see Catherine and tell her of them. I am become a Jonah, it seems. Troubles follow me. Only serious need would bring me over here, because to come and see her is to force her to disobey her father, and that is not my right."

She saw that he was troubled and anxious. To cheer him she answered briskly:

"Not your right *yet*, Mr. Martindale. But perhaps it will be before long. And you may be sure *she* will not blame you for coming. Oh, dear Cathy! How wonderful the surprise will be!" She rose, of a sudden businesslike. "Now you must go and find her. She had only started a few moments before you came. You have ridden?" He nodded. "Well—

she has gone to the north-east lodge and from there she will cross the common to what we call the five-mile stone—you cannot miss it; there is a cross-roads with a tall clump of beeches in one angle.—Probably from the stone she will follow the Maull road a little way to where a gate on the left leads into East Side Wood. There is a grass drive through that wood back into the home park. I feel sure that is the way she will go. We were planning it just before she left. Do you therefore take it the reverse way. Then you will meet her. Come—I will show you the direction."

She hurried him to the stable-yard, where he had tied his horse; thence past the kennels and to a gate leading into the park.

"You see the line of woods yonder? That is East Side. Go straight from here—the turf is good and no holes—and when you get near the trees you will see a tall dead oak. It was struck by lightning and stands a little out from the rest of the wood. The drive is just behind it. You cannot go wrong from there."

He bowed over her hand and murmured thanks.

"Hurry!" she cried. "Thank me all you will, when it is over."

He was in the saddle and already off.

"Good luck!" she shouted, waving her handkerchief; then turned and went back to the house, glowing and breathless, as though the lover were her own and all her pains to serve him self-advantaging.

II

There was a tang of autumn in the air through which, on Sylvia's back, Catherine speeded. She threw up her head to let the sharp breeze stir the curls that strayed beneath her hat and still the pulses in her throat. The easy movement of the little mare brought a new rhythm—swift but quiet—into the torment of her thoughts. She gazed about her as she went, and saw the rolling grass land and the far-banked woods, already showing here and there the burnished touch of autumn's fingers. A vast immensity of sky, its blue piled richly with great tumbled clouds, spoke of illimitable distances. She felt the walls of her captivity recede and fade. Somewhere beneath that fresh exhilarating sky was surely freedom? And with a touch she sent the little Sylvia flying the faster on her way, as though they two were in a race for liberty and might at last find wings to soar, like birds once caged but now set free, to some cloud castle, where was sanctuary.

At the park gates she checked, and dawdled happily across the common. She felt the mare's flanks quiver and the rise and fall of breathlessness. "Poor little Sylvia," said Catherine. "Is she out of breath? And I told your mistress I would be so kind to you!"

At the five-mile stone she stood and looked about her. That road went Severnwards; and that, after long miles, to Bath; the third was marked for Clanworth. And the fourth? She walked the mare round the grey stone to read its hidden side. To Maull! Of course, Lucretia had said so. To Maull! And five miles only! Five miles to Maull. . . . Five miles to Philip Crossley and his uncanny father; to the sly, crumbling, beautiful old manor with its queer airless garden, its yew-room and its detested orchid houses. Five miles to Maull. A devil whispered gleefully: "Five miles to Maull, my Lady Lypiatt! Five miles to home and husband and your place for life!" No, no! She almost cried aloud. "I will not! Do you hear, I *will* not!" Then wrenched the bridle, so that the little Sylvia—a trifle startled and dismayed—wheeled round and started smartly down that very road.

Catherine's first instinct was to pull up and turn toward the south or west, to turn anywhere save along those five miles of evil portent. But the next moment she was smiling at her own tragic fancies. Was she afraid of Crossley that she should let the thought of him drive her from public roads? Then she recalled that Lucretia had bidden her take this very road, because a mile or two along was access to the woods of Laffeter. "She would have made good fun of me," thought Catherine, "if I had got back and confessed that the very word of Maull upon a milestone had frightened me away!" Thus fortified, she let the mare stray quietly.

A moment later she chanced to look forward. Her heart gave a great bound, then seemed to stop its beating. The colour mounted to her face and neck; her body trembled.

"Frank!"

She thought to shout with all her might, but the word came like a faint sigh and in the kind hands of the wind was borne to where are treasured all the names that lovers breathe when voices, for the love that breathes them, have not resonance. She swayed a little in the saddle. Each instant he was nearer. Sylvia, feeling unwonted turmoil in her rider's being, stopped of her own accord and, scenting pleasant grass beside the road, edged in pursuit of it. She reached it uncontrolled and found a succulence surprising for the time of year. She hardly noticed that another horse was at her side, while the proceedings of that horse's rider and her own she totally ignored.

For Catherine those moments of love-meeting were as short as mockery. She could have dreamed an hour away in sitting happily thus close to him, leaning a little so that her arm and shoulder could touch his, feeling his hand on hers. But he, for all his tenderness, was grave and restive, seeming to wish an end of dalliance, as one who has unpleasant duty and would quickly compass it. At last, and unmistakably, he sat back on his horse. She looked at him a little wistfully, winding her fingers into his.

" Kiss me again, Frank! You have hardly kissed me yet."

" Darling, I am here with bad news. Let me get it said."

" I cannot bear it, unless you kiss me again. . . . Please, Frank. . . . There! Now I can hear your horrid news and laugh at it. Dear Frank! Why did you not answer my letter? Was I too forward, Frank? Are you angry?"

He groaned.

" Sweetheart, I think it was your letter kept me sane these dreadful days. I have begun three answers and torn them up. At last I have come to try what speech could do."

" But, Frank, what is it? Surely that accident to the poor horse has not been troubling you all this while?"

" It is not the horse now, darling. It is the other matter."

" What other matter? I have heard nothing. Oh Frank—you look so worn and thin! Have they been cruel to you? Tell me!"

" You have not heard? About the man Slatter being half-killed at night?" She shook her head, gazing with wide astonished eyes.

"You poor, patient, faithful child—to wait on and on and knowing nothing! No wonder you blame me for not answering! Let us dismount and I will tell you the whole story."

They tied the horses to a gate and settled side by side upon the ivy-covered bank. Frank told his tale from start to finish—from the sad moment of the horse's accident to that of the grotesque procession through the midnight streets in search of doctor's aid. Continuing he said:

"That any man could seriously suspect *me* of the deed never occurred to me. Jenkins is always a fool and Slatter in his wounded state was, I imagined, raving. Their behaviour angered me, as ugly folly often angers. Nothing more. But the next day—the day on which I got your splendid letter—showed me that others shared their madness. The police questioned me; then a day later came again, catching my mother when I was out. Lean told me that—well, that others, ill-disposed to me, were saying things. Slatter himself, on the other hand, challenged on oath, went back on his words. He said that he was set upon, struck suddenly from behind with a heavy stick (and his right arm is certainly broken); that then blows had been rained on him, and at the last his face had been deliberately cut with broken glass. He did not see the men, but found me by his side immediately afterwards. He admits he may have confused things. They found glass littered in the alley and it is true that I was carrying my ash-stick—as I always do when I go out at night. The thing has a heavy knob and would break a man's arm surely enough, if it were used with that intent."

"But, Frank!" she interjected. "The thing is ludicrous. As if you would attack a man like any footpad!"

He shook his head.

"So *you* say, sweetheart, for you know you could not love a man who was a blackguard. But there are many willing to think otherwise. You see, Slatter and I were on bad terms. That is well known. And there is another thing——"

He stopped. She stroked his hand with soothing finger tips, knowing that in this record of disaster some further misadventure must be told.

"Poor dear," she murmured. "How the world is cruel!"

He caught her friendly fingers and pressed them till they hurt.

"God bless you, child," he said, "for your trust and for your courage, though they make what I must tell you hard to say. You must understand, my darling, that I had thought and thought about you and about myself and what was the right thing to do. Before the Show and all this new trouble, I had half a dozen times decided to—to—to go away, and for your ultimate peace, to see you no more.

—No! Let me go on, dearest,"—for she half started from her seat and was exclaiming at his threat of disappearance—" As often as I made this terrible decision, I changed my mind. To break one's own heart needs a stronger nerve than mine. I felt it would be easier to blow my brains out and so to pass into the night, than to turn my back on you, who are my sunshine and all of spring and every flower there is, and, while yet living, to go away to years of greyness. So, as I say, I would swing back again and set my teeth and trust in God to bring things out to happiness. But then came the Show and Lean's misfortune. Without quite knowing why, I felt that indirectly our futures were affected by the accident. I was more hopeless than ever before. As I stood before Mr. Ashworth, I could see the others whispering behind him and I knew they were my enemies——"

" Who were they ? " she demanded.

As soon as spoken he had repented the rash words. In the face of her quick question he hesitated. She squeezed his arm against her breast.

" I know who they were," she whispered. " Never mind. Go on with your story."

" Somehow I felt that I was beaten. As I walked home, I came at last to resolution. This—well, you and I—it couldn't do. It could never do. It must be ended, and only I could bring the thing to pass. On an impulse

I went in to see Sir Harry's agent and—and gave him notice I was leaving Fleddon."

She gasped; then clung to him:

"No, no! Frank. You won't do that! You won't leave me all alone? I can't bear it, Frank. I shall go mad or kill myself. I—I——"

Suddenly she broke off and, with a change of mood from anguish to a quiet serenity that tore his heart strings by its lovely confidence, smiled into his eyes.

"I am silly," she said with a low laugh. "For I am coming with you, am I not? I had forgotten the letter—the letter that you have not answered."

"But, sweetheart!" he expostulated. "Don't you see, if I am to be suspected of attacking Slatter, how badly this notice of departure looks? The agent will certainly tell the police. He has probably done so already. What will they conclude, when they know that a few hours before the outrage I was making arrangements to leave Fleddon?"

She sat a while and gazed in front of her, a tiny frown wrinkling the smooth skin of her forehead.

"Then," she said at last, "we must be gone the quicker, Frank. Or, to lose less time still, do you go *now* and I will return home and see your mother and in a few days' time you will send word where we both shall join you."

He was the more tender for her gallant naïveté.

"Darling, I cannot run away—especially at this juncture. The petty sessions are, I think, the day after to-morrow, and I may have—I will certainly have to appear—as witness, if nothing worse. As witness, I hope. No one has told me officially that I am suspect. But were I to disappear now, it would be almost an admission. No, dear heart, I must stand by and see it through!"

"Well, then," she asked. "What is to happen?"

He shook his head.

"I do not know. Perhaps before the case comes up, one of those actually concerned will make confession. I heard their footsteps, you remember! George Lean, who is furious that I should be accused, goes everywhere seeking the culprits."

"This Slatter—how I hate him!—is he recovered?"

"No. He is bad," returned Frank gravely. "Of course the broken arm and the cut face are in themselves no more than painful and disfiguring. But he was struck or kicked about the body, and they fear internal injury. I have not heard how he is this morning. I was away early as I had a call to make which took me from my way. The bulletin last night was a little better. Maybe. . . ."

"Oh, Frank! And if he dies?"

"Let us pray God to spare him, child. If he were indeed to die, I dare not think of what may come of it."

Catherine began suddenly to cry. She laid her head upon her lover's shoulder and wound her arms about his body.

"They shall take me too!" she sobbed. "I will not leave you, Frank. God has forsaken us. Oh, my dear, my dear——!"

He could not trust himself to speak, but rocked her gently to and fro, seeking to comfort her by soft caresses, although the while his heart was ashes and despair.

Thus, for a space, they two unhappy lovers clung together, till Catherine's tears grew less and slowly the grief that racked her spent itself.

Composure was recaptured none too soon. Without a moment's warning came another crisis in their fate. Beyond their chosen seat upon the bank the road turned sharply and now, around the corner not a hundred yards away, Felix came riding.

At first he did not recognise the couple crouching on the roadside, but, when he apprehended them, they saw his small pale face grow rigid with astonishment and the next instant sharpen into rage. Now he was close upon them, his horse pulled to a standstill, his small malignant eyes fiery and insolent. Instinctively Frank rose to his feet. Catherine, still seated, met her brother's gaze unflinchingly. She was dishevelled and her eyes were red with weeping, but pride and a hostility that had been born of the last half-hour's anguished love gave her a dignity before which, though hardly knowing it, Felix quailed. He ignored the man and spoke to his sister only.

" I was coming to see you, Catherine. I confess I had not expected to find you flirting in a ditch."

The vulgarity heightened her queenliness.

" I do not want to see you," she said. " You can go home again."

He laughed unpleasantly.

" And leave you to your squeezing, I suppose? Perhaps you will be interested to learn that your fine lover is to be had for manslaughter."

Although she was not in that moment conscious of their ultimate significance, his words struck her like blows. Her heart stood still and then began to race. She summoned all her strength and let no trace of terror cloud her contemptuous calm. Turning her head indifferently she plucked at grasses from the tangled bank. Felix threw off the clumsy sarcasm that cloaked his temper.

" Do you hear me ? " he shouted. " Answer me when I speak ! Do you hear what I say ? "

" I hear you," she replied. " I cannot help it. But I do not want either to see or hear you. Please go away."

Thus baulked the rider furiously turned on Martindale.

"As for you, sir—I am not surprised that you should prefer some other part of the county to Fleddon. But I'm damned if I'll have you running to my sister for shelter. Be off, before I drive you!"

Frank, who was standing in the road a few feet from Felix' horse, spoke collectedly:

"Mr. Ormond, you do not understand my business with Miss Ormond and I am afraid I must decline to discuss it with you."

"Oh-ho! You must decline, must you?" roared Felix. "By God, Mr. Gentleman Cad, perhaps you will also decline to discuss this or—or this—or this——!"

And with his riding whip he struck the man who stood beside him three savage blows across the face.

Frank staggered backward, rallied and seemed about to spring. Then, with a sudden crumpling of the shoulders, turned away, covering his face with his right arm. Catherine, who had leapt from her seat when Felix raised his whip, reached the spot as the last blow fell. She saw her lover reel and marked his poor face taut with pain; she saw the impulse to strike back, the sudden fierce control, the horrid shudder and, as he swung round upon his heel, the arm raised shakily to hide the wounded face.

"Oh!" she cried, poised on her toes,

hands clenched and arms drawn back with elbows bent. " Oh, you beast ! "

The next moment came the thought of her lover's suffering. She ran toward him, stifled the cry that rose to greet the livid weals and the great angry cut upon his lip and cheek, and spoke him urgently :

" Sit down, Frank ! Sit down here ! I will see to it. Oh your poor darling face ! See, hold this handkerchief to check the blood a moment."

He motioned her away with his free arm.

" Let me be," he muttered. " Let me be. I shall be all right. Where are the horses ? "

Gropingly he stumbled on the uneven grass. She guided him to where the horses stood, while her mind worked at lightning speed. " Better to let him go," she thought ; and grimly : " I will pay his reckoning."

" Can you mount, Frank ? Lean on me."

He set his teeth and made as if to mount. But with a low moan of pain, fell against the saddle, bowing his tortured head. The little handkerchief was wringing blood. The cut bled on.

" Wait, Frank ! " she cried, and, unabashed as were she in her bedchamber, she slipped her hands beneath her skirt and ripped her fine white linen petticoat from its tapes. She tore it into strips and bound his face as best she might.

" That will draw the edges together. Now ride up to the house and ask for Lucretia. I will be there nearly as soon as you. Put your hand on my shoulder. Now up! Here are your hat and crop."

He settled in the saddle with the instinctive readiness of a practised horseman. Without a sign to her nor any word, he gathered the reins and shook them feebly. The horse picked his way over the rough ground to the hard surface of the road, and set off at an easy walk. To Catherine watching, it seemed that the rider's figure swayed a little limply in the saddle. Then she faced about and looked for Felix.

He was not far away. When he had struck out at Martindale, an expectation of reprisal had kept him poised and watchful. But as soon as it was clear that the blows were not to be returned, and when he saw that his sister was more concerned to tend her lover's wounds than to spit helpless anger at the cause of them, he turned his horse and walked him a few yards further up the road, there to await the next development. He had not finished yet with Catherine, and he surmised that the man Martindale would slink away, leaving his mistress to make such terms with outraged family as might be feasible. Indifferently he watched her simple efforts at first aid; noted for future use in argument the shameless source of bandages; saw with approval that the man staggered with the pain of his well-merited chastisement. Self-complacency stifled in Felix' breast any misgiving that, when first the victim of his anger had reeled backward, he might have felt. "That's the way to treat them!" he told himself. "Fellows of that kind don't understand arguments of decency." He observed Frank ride away and saw that Catherine was, with the gate's help, mounting her mare. She came composedly toward him. Felix assumed an air of grave displeasure.

"Now, Catherine; kindly listen to me. You have done very wrong and it does not improve matters for you to be insolent. You realise how serious this is? What do you imagine the governor will say when I tell him?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"What will you tell him?" she inquired, swinging an ivory-handled crop in her free hand.

"I shall tell him you are not only disobedient but choose to meet your low-born lover in the public lanes where any passer-by can see you. I shall tell him that when I spoke to you, you were impudent. I shall tell him that my Uncle Severn's hospitality is used as a convenient cloak for assignations and that guests at Laffeter who so behave——"

"Will you tell him," interrupted Catherine, "how bravely you took part?"

Felix flushed angrily.

"I shall certainly say that I thrashed the fellow as he deserved."

"You must inherit something of papa's valour," she said thoughtfully. "He dares to hit a girl when no one else is by to save her from his fury; but *you—you* even venture to strike an unarmed man across the face in the presence of the girl who loves him. That is wonderful!"

"Damn your impudence!" snarled Felix, turning suddenly upon her. "You'll hold your tongue, my girl, or be sorry for it."

Now she threw acting to the winds and faced him like a fury.

"You unutterable little beast!" The voice was low, but the words cut like bitter whips. "As if you would dare to lift a finger to Frank when he stood man to man with you!" Quicker and quicker came the words, and with her rising fury rose her voice also. "You think I don't know all the lies and cowardly things you have been saying of him? You think I am an ignorant girl who leans on great wise men like you for knowledge of the world? You fool—you sneaking cowardly fool! Here is one answer to your lies, you beast!—and another—and——"

The crop flashed in the air and its carved ivory handle, elaborately mounted in gold, struck Felix twice across the mouth. He swerved away, but not in time to prevent a third blow, harder than the rest, striking his horse on the flank at its tenderest spot. The creature reared and plunged and set off down the road at a mad gallop. The rider, spitting blood and half choked with the front teeth that the hard ivory had driven down his throat, clutched wildly at the reins. Catherine, still quivering with rage, followed for a few moments with her fiery eyes the lurching mass of frightened horse and cursing helpless horseman. Then with a tightening of the lips, she turned and made good haste for Laffeter.

III

Lucretia, sewing in the garden-house, looked up with blank astonishment at her peremptory cousin, who stood with hat awry and clothes all disarranged, demanding Frank.

"But, Cathy!" she expostulated. "Surely he found you?"

Catherine stamped.

"Goose!" she clamoured. "Where is he *now?* Did you have his face tended? Is he lying down? Tell me where he is."

"Dearest girl," replied the other, "I do not understand. The young man came just after you had gone out riding, and I sent him after you. Why should I tend his face? It is a handsome one; but after all you have the prior claim. I am no poacher."

"Oh, Lou, don't fool! I bade him come back here. He is hurt. Haven't you seen him at all?"

Lucretia woke to the problem's gravity.

Her sewing slipped to the floor and she came quickly to her cousin's side.

" He has not been back a second time, Cathy. What has happened ? And you yourself, poor darling—you are all tousled. Come to the house. Tell me what has happened ! "

As they went up to Catherine's room, she poured out with the excited incoherence of exhausted rage, the record of the afternoon. Lucretia interjected little oh's and ah's, but made no comment till the tale was done. Then, gazing in admiration at her cousin-heroine, she let amazement loose.

" Cathy, how splendid of you ! Why was I not there ? Nothing tremendous ever happens to me. And you really struck your brother ! Oh, Cathy—how you dared ! What will happen now ? Will not my uncle Ormond be very angry ? Shall we run away and hide somewhere ? You will let me come with you, Cathy ? Pray, pray, let me ! "

Catherine was flinging her clothes about the floor. She held aloft a tape from which some rags of linen hung.

" That's my petticoat," she observed. The tone was proudly nonchalant, as of some modest but victorious Amazon. Lucretia gasped again.

" But, my dear ! Your petticoat ! What in the name of goodness . . . ? "

" Well, I had to find a bandage somewhere." The warrior's pride gave sudden place to womanly compassion. "Oh, Lou, he was bleeding dreadfully! I do wonder where he's gone! Why didn't he come here? He isn't fit to ride that distance home." She turned a little wildly on her friend. "Lou, I must go and look for him. Why am I taking my things off? I must go after him!"

The slight figure, standing forlornly with its rope of hair and thin white shift, swayed pitifully. In full reaction from the drama of an hour ago, Catherine was of an instant very tired. Her head whirled; her eyes were shining hollows in a drawn white face.

"I must go and find him," she repeated dully, but the next moment swayed again and put her hands to her head. "My head aches," she faltered, as though she were pleading for mercy on her weakness.

Lucretia drew her to the bed.

"You must lie down, dearest. See—here is your dressing-gown. I will send Grimes to find your Frank. No—lie down, Cathy, like a good girl. Grimes will find him. You are worn out. In a few minutes I will be back. We will have our tea up here, just cosily, you and I."

She tucked the eiderdown about her now submissive cousin and slipped away. Catherine, left to herself, drowsed happily. The aching head grew easier. She was weary but content. She could not think of Felix without a glow of satisfaction at the vengeance she had taken. Something was now bound to happen. Her parents could no longer smother her love story. What would they do? Perhaps she would be beaten by Sir Harry? The idea prompted a wan smile, even in her solitude. "Perhaps not!" she thought. "Papa has had his fill of beating me." Perhaps she would be turned out of doors into the street. "I do not care. Besides, mamma would follow me to see that I was safe." There crept into her mind a germ of understanding. Catherine chuckled. She had forced an issue and an issue that must at the last mean victory. Lucretia had not returned. Why not? Surely she could have sent Grimes on his way by now? Once more anxiety for Frank possessed her. Once more she shivered at the dull thud of Felix' crop on that defenceless face. She clenched her fists and rolled over on to her other side. The hateful cruelty of her brother's action tightened her muscles, and she lay a while rigid with horror and with rage. The tension was relaxed when, in course of retrospect, she came again to her assault on Felix. The thought of retribution fairly softened her. She slid once more into a pleasant lassitude and fell asleep.

There was a knocking at the door. Expecting Lucretia, from whom a knock were mere formality, Catherine, fresh roused from slumber and far from wakeful, did not reply. But the knock came again, and a servant's voice asked: "Are you there, miss?" With an exclamation of annoyance she rubbed her eyes and crawled unsteadily out of bed. She drew her dressing-gown about her, opened the door and found a maid, who said there was a gentleman below particularly anxious to speak to her.

Catherine stared sleepily. After a short pause:

"A gentleman?" she muttered. "What is his name?"

"I think that Perry said his name was Crossley, miss."

"Crossley!" Catherine groped feebly for her bemused intelligence. She was sufficiently awake to shrink from meeting yet another crisis, but not, as yet, awake enough to draw conclusions from the caller's name.

"I am lying down——," she began vaguely. "I cannot——"

"Yes, miss. I told Perry so, miss. I said you could not be disturbed. But the gentleman was so very pressing."

Catherine still stared at the embarrassed girl, while slowly her ideas took shape and in her heart fear faintly stirred.

"Mr Crossley, you said? And he is pressing? Well——" With a tremulous sigh, "I will see him. Please say that I will be downstairs in ten minutes." As the girl turned to go Catherine called after her: "Is the Lady Lucretia in the house? I would like to speak to her."

"No, miss. I have not seen her ladyship. I think she went out riding a little while ago."

Catherine went back into her room and closed the door. Lucretia must have gone herself to look for Frank. Such sweet impulsive service was characteristic of her. Mr. Crossley? Which Mr. Crossley? Could it be Hugh? Impossible, alas; he was in London. It must be Philip. Why then should Philip Crossley come? What could he want so urgently? Again fear stirred. Something about Felix? Felix had said he was staying at Maull. Perhaps the man had come to see her about Felix. Her lips set tightly. She must be calm and even with him. Philip Crossley should have nothing for his trouble—not a word or sign, nor a tremor. As she combed out her plait of hair, she mustered all that she had of resolution. For all her weariness she braced herself for yet a new ordeal. If Philip Crossley had come to speak reproof, she would make very clear that such reproof was not his duty and would not be borne. If Philip Crossley came with news of serious hurt to Felix, she would be unrepentant and aloof. She recalled her brother's unsteady plunging course along the road. Her final sight of him had been of one whose speed was far more certain than his seat. Perhaps he had been thrown; perhaps——? She tossed her head. Before Philip Crossley she would not blench, no matter how grave the accident.

She chose a plain black gown, with ruffles at the neck and wrists. In her plainly braided hair she wound black velvet ribbon. Then, pale and stately, descended to the morning-room.

He was standing by the mantelpiece and, as she entered, crossed the room with the smooth sidling gait that she so well remembered. He was as ever dressed in sombre clothes. His boots shone; his linen was as glossy and as formal as that of any west-end doctor on a fashionable round.

" You will excuse my keeping you waiting," said Catherine. " I was not expecting a visitor."

He had bowed over her hand and now, with quiet deference, waved her apology aside.

" It is I, Miss Catherine, who require pardon. Only the extreme urgency of my business can justify my coming in this way without notice, and, I fear, disturbing you during your siesta. I am very sorry."

She inclined her head and quietly chose a chair.

" Please sit down, Mr. Crossley. What is your business with me? "

He seated himself a little awkwardly, and for a moment leant forward on his stick, his knees apart, his hat and gloves held firmly in one hand. When he spoke, it was with deliberate care.

"You will recall, Miss Catherine, our last conversation together. It concluded with my promising to wait on you in a month's time to see whether perhaps your view of my proposal of marriage might in the interval have become more favourable. To-day although a full month has not yet elapsed, I have called upon you, and the fact merits explanation."

"Good heavens!" thought Catherine. "He's never come just to propose to me again?" Aloud she said:

"Please do not trouble with explanation, Mr. Crossley. I am of the same mind as previously and shall remain so."

He gestured with his hand, as though to brush aside irrelevance. His eyes were still fixed on the carpet and he resumed, as was his habit, with the manner of one whose soliloquy has been undeservedly disturbed.

"You may be sure, Miss Catherine, that I should have been scrupulous in my coming, had other things been equal. But they are not. Much has happened since our first discussion, and of a kind to influence my importunity and your reception of it. One thing has happened in particular. ('Now,' thought Catherine, 'we are coming to Felix. Take care, Mr. Philip Crossley; take care!') I refer, of course, to this sad affair at Fleddon."

"Which sad affair, Mr. Crossley?" she inquired, wishing to make his task as difficult as might be, wishing to shake his cold composure and, when the moment came, to put him to confusion.

At this he raised his pale eyes from the carpet and looked across at her.

" Surely you have heard of the outrage, Miss Catherine? A man called Slatter—— ? "

" Oh, that ! " she said purposely insouciant, " that is old history. Is the man better ? "

His agate eyes, flat and relentless, never moved.

" But your brother, Miss Catherine. . . . Did he not tell you ? "

Enlightened by his words she planned instinctively to change her ground. She knew now that Felix had been bringing news of Slatter; that Crossley believed this message had been given. Crossley, then, was ignorant that she and Felix had already met and of that meeting's outcome. Therefore he had not visited her to speak of Felix. Of what then? Her schemes and terrors fell into disarray. Feverishly she sought for explanation of his coming; for explanation of that dull changeless gaze, that even as she watched began to change, that woke from bleak insistence to perplexity, and from perplexity to malevolence. She dared not hesitate, so to gain time repeated Crossley's words:

" Did he not tell me ? Felix told me nothing, Mr. Crossley."

Was it imagination, or did the corner of his mouth turn down in the suspicion of a smile ?

She strove with all her might for self-possession.

"I am surprised that he should tell you nothing—if you have really seen him."

She flashed her answer back.

"Certainly, I have seen him. He will tell you so himself," and added, faintly mimicking: "—when next you really meet."

Anger passed like a shadow over Crossley's eyes. It went as soon as it had come, but she had seen it and rejoiced to think him piqued. For a moment they watched each other without speaking. Crossley was puzzled. How could it be that Felix, who had set out from Maull an hour before him, who had—by the girl's own admission—met his sister, should not have said the one thing that he went to say? What could have happened? Crossley resented his own ignorance. He was a man who always liked to be informed on any subject. He could not bear that others should have knowledge, denied to him but yet accessible. To stand at such a disadvantage to the girl before him shook his nerve. He it was who had sought her out; his the task of taking the initiative. She could sit there silently and watch him with her serious brown eyes that spoke of dislike as clearly as her tongue could utter it. But he must find speech, must explain himself. He would attempt to startle her. A woman startled will let fall words that clever men can gather and interpret.

"You asked me a moment ago," he said gravely, "whether the man Slatter was better. Miss Catherine"—and he paused impressively—"the man is dead."

She had known it. She must have known it. Before he spoke she would have denied the knowledge; but now she understood that, from the moment Felix had spoken of "manslaughter," she had apprehended Slatter's death. She understood it now, because, when Crossley stated the bald fact, she heard it equably as one may hear the repetition of familiar tragedy. She raised her hands in decent show of grieved surprise.

"Dead! Oh, Mr. Crossley! Poor man—poor man. . . ."

He nodded a slow endorsement of her sympathy.

"Poor fellow, indeed! To fall a victim to so cowardly an assault."

Once more they waited on each other's next initiative. Catherine sat motionless, her hands crossed lightly in her lap, her head a little drooped as though from courtesy to Slatter's memory. She said no word. Crossley, fretted by her continued silence, spoke peevishly:

"You are not interested in the sad affair, perhaps?"

"Should I be interested, Mr. Crossley?"

He checked a hasty answer.

"I ventured to think" he said carefully, "that as the—the calamity took place in Fleddon——"

She rose abruptly from her chair.

"Mr. Crossley—if you have fetched me from my room only to discuss week-old sensations, I will withdraw. I was told your business was urgent. It appears to me——"

He also was on his feet. She was angry now, and with her anger came, perhaps, his opportunity. The bland aloofness of her earlier manner had baffled him, but for a girl through irritation off her guard he knew himself a match.

"Miss Catherine," he broke in, "I beg you to give me a minute longer. I assure you that I have come with good reason. I was surprised that your brother had not, as he set out to do, prepared the way for what I have to say. I ask your pardon for my clumsiness."

She did not resume her seat, but leaning on the back of a chair waited in obvious haste to hear his message, and be done with it. Once more discountenanced by her reserve, he hesitated. She was impatient.

"Well, Mr. Crossley?"

"You make it hard for me," he mumbled.

She raised her eyebrows and the touch of insolence goaded him to hurried speech.

"I wished to spare you, but you give me no help. You know—I must apologise for reverting to the 'week-old sensation'—who is suspected of the attack on Slatter?"

The tone rather than the words had meaning. She knew now the purport of his visit. He came to threaten. She must then fight for Frank once more? So be it; fight she would.

"Who is suspected?" she drawled. "Really, Mr. Crossley, why ask me?"

Rage set the room dancing before his eyes, but with a fierce determination he mastered it.

"You choose to evade my questions, Miss Catherine——" he began. But she interrupted him.

"By what right do you ask me questions, pray?"

He bowed his head submissively, rather to hide a smile of triumph than in humility.

"By no right," he said, and his eyes were veiled. "Again I beg your pardon. The fault lies in my anxiety not to be brutal. Since you prefer plain speaking, I will speak plainly. The affair is mysterious, but suspicion rests on a person whom you know—a Mr. Martindale." As he spoke the name he gave her a quick upward glance. A tremor, slight but unmistakable, had shaken her. He looked away and continued speaking: "The evidence is of the slightest; indeed, apart from the fact that the dead man first accused Martindale (he later recanted somewhat), that a man named Jenkins found them alone together after the crime had been committed, and one or two other points—it hardly exists. All the same there *is* suspicion, and the case will come before the bench to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" she cried quickly. "I thought——"

Then broke off and coloured with the shame of indiscretion.

"You thought——?" he echoed. "You know, then, all that I am telling you?"

But she only shook her head, and stood there biting her lips and blushing miserably. Crossley resumed with greater relish:

"It is impossible to say what view the magistrates will take of the matter. There are many in Fleddon who claim that evidence in favour of Martindale is more abundant and no less indirect than that against him. They speak of him as a young man of high character, to whom any such dastardly action as a night assault on an unsuspecting man were quite impossible. Against this is the accumulation of curious facts that point the other way. I will not weary you with them. Indeed you are, I daresay, already familiar with all that I can tell. But now I come to the real reason of this unwelcome conversation. Suppose that, when the case is judged, some further evidence on one side or the other, some evidence with a *direct bearing* on the case, were to be offered? What then? Surely the magistrates' decision would be immediately influenced?"

He paused to allow his argument to tell.

He was well pleased to feel that with each balanced phrase, the girl's resistance yielded a little more. He glanced across at her. She was leaning toward him and her great eyes were dark with pleading; the hands upon the chair-back gripped the wood so tightly that the knuckles glimmered white. Let him but prolong the tale a few more minutes. . . .

"I am not saying," he resumed, "that some conclusive evidence in favour of this Mr. Martindale is not already in his friends' possession. It may be so; but I doubt it. I doubt it very much. Your brother, who has naturally played a part in the investigations of the past few days, is convinced that no alibi is to be proved. He was only telling me so this noon, when he arrived at Maull from Fleddon. The death of Slatter, as you will realise, makes the matter so much more serious. The man was alive at nine o'clock this morning. Indeed they thought he was recovering. But he relapsed badly, and died just after ten. Your brother started immediately for Maull, bringing the news. You wonder why he should so quickly bring the news to me? I will tell you, Miss Catherine. Because I have some evidence that might make things go hard with Mr. Martindale. Your brother knew this and knew further that, while I might not have felt it my duty to appear in a case of mere assault (as I expect you know, my father is very weak and I should be unwilling to leave him, even for a few hours, save for very pressing reasons), I should wish to know at once, now that the case had, by Slatter's death, become one of manslaughter. I was grateful to your brother, Miss Catherine. It was thoughtful in him. I have now to decide how, as a citizen, I ought to act. Will you advise me? Is it my duty to come forward and to give information that by merest chance I happen to possess? Is it, Miss Catherine?"

The girl's control was nearly gone. The slow malignity of Crossley's talk had worked upon the several barricades that in despair she had thrown up about her solitary defencelessness. First the disdainful unconcern, then the silence, finally the irony, with each of which in turn she had sought to keep this enemy at bay, had rocked and crumbled. She made one final gesture of defiance.

"If Felix knows your evidence, Mr. Crossley, the problem is as much his as yours."

He smiled.

"In a sense, yes. But his testimony could only be of hearsay and, as such, would not be admitted. Only *I* can say what I can say—if I desire to."

She said nothing, only stared at him with hostile eyes.

He was all blandness, as he resumed:

"I might persuade myself that I heard wrongly. Second thoughts, you know, Miss Catherine——"

She saw her opportunity:

"I hardly think evidence so—so accommodating—would have weight—in the long run."

"Then you will not advise me?" he said sharply. "You will not take any step to save your—friend?"

She stepped back and the chair suddenly released, swung forward, overbalanced and fell heavily. She started at the noise, but did not take her eyes from his. With hands raised to her throat she retreated across the room until a high book-case stopped her progress.

"What can I do?" she cried, and her voice was piteous. "What can I do?"

He raised his hand and, leaning forward, began to speak with a rapidity at once confidential and businesslike. He had now the manner of one who saw an end to his negotiations.

"This you can do. You can decide what testimony, if any, I shall give. Shall I appear before the magistrates and declare that I heard this young man say on the Show-field that Slatter should be 'paid in his own coin'?—for those were the words that I informed your brother I had heard. Or shall I not appear at all? Or shall I go still further and declare that, after reflection, the words were said by some one else and that Mr. Martindale, so far from approving, rebuked them? I should be loth to choose my story—without your help, Miss Catherine."

With hands spread out to grip the bookcase ledge, she bent toward him.

"Why should I believe either tale?" she cried. "One must be false. Why not both?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"The point is immaterial."

"You would swear to a lie?" she whispered, horror-stricken.

He exclaimed impatiently:

"These big words! We are here to make a bargain. My conscience is my own affair. Leave me to manage it. I am quite candid with you. I want *you*, Miss Catherine, and when I want a thing I mean to have it." His voice, which had quickly risen, became almost a scream. He raised his trembling hand and shook it passionately. "And have you I will—you lovely bitter thing—or you shall see your beggar lover sent to Assizes and, after that, who shall say whither? If you think me the kind of milksop to be overcome by your Christian morality——" His queer excitement died as rapidly as it had come to birth; once more he was cold and inexorable and smooth: "Well, which is to be, Miss Ormond? Make up your mind!"

She was standing upright now, a tortured caryatid below the heavy cornice of the bookcase. For a moment or two she struggled with the tears of indignation and of weariness that choked her speech. At last in a strangled voice:

"Go!" she muttered. "I have nothing to say to you."

He tightened his lips and gathered up the hat and gloves that, during the conversation, he had laid aside.

"That is your last word?"

And again she whispered "Go!"

He gave her a searching bitter glance.

"I am sorry," he said. "Things must now take their course."

As he strode from the room, his long legs were awkward in their urgency and his shoulders swayed unevenly from side to side. The door closed and Catherine's head sank back against the book-shelves. The chairs and tables, the marble mantelpiece before which a moment since Crossley was standing, swam before her eyes. It seemed the next moment that Lucretia, in her riding habit, ran into the room.

"Cathy! Cathy! I tried to catch your Frank! Indeed I did! But as I came in sight, two men met him and—and—and he was taken off between them. Oh, my poor darling—they were police! Cathy! Look at me! Speak to me, Cathy!"

But the other only stared wildly into space; then swayed and, pitching forward to a chair, broke into low tearless wailing.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I

SLATTER's death transformed within an hour an interesting local scandal into a grave county tragedy. The citizens of Fleddon, hurrying from place to place or standing in excited groups, made ardent show of horror and distress, but were not free from secret pride in thinking that their town could thus provide a genuine sensation.

Frank's mother heard the news with sinking heart. Throughout the slow preceding days she had carried a high head in public, and with her bewildered son had played the calmly confident. But secretly had she been fearful, and, though incredulous, less convinced a champion of Frank's innocence than ever he suspected or than she would, even to herself, admit. She could not forget his words to her when, on the very night of the assault, they had sat talking in the garden. She knew that midnight violence was as little in his character as theft. But circumstances may have brought him and Slatter face and face. Frank was excited against Slatter, full of the almost savage fury that those who love dumb beasts feel towards persons harming them. The mother shuddered to think of Frank and Slatter —one vulgarly abusive, the other raging—shut off from men and commonsense by the quiet darkness. Was it impossible that, carried beyond himself, Frank had done this thing? She could not dismiss the question for absurd; she would not, even with her own questioning conscience, argue it. So, between private fears and the cruel weariness of outward calm, her life was torment and she dragged unhappily from dawn to dusk. To meet the fresh blow of Slatter's death she was but ill prepared. Reserves of strength were running low. First came news the man was dead. Then Frank, at the expected hour, did not return. Frantic with helpless apprehension she waited in her little kitchen, now sitting idle by the untidy table, now going to the window, now to the door. She even ran out to the garden and peered from time to time along the solitude of Rising Road. But no Frank came nor news of Frank, and the afternoon sun sank slowly in the sky. At last with dragging step a caller's shadow fell across the window of the room. It was not Frank's step and the mother, sunk in despondency, hardly raised her head. George Lean, standing at the kitchen door, saw in the fading light the bent figure crouching in its chair. He pulled uncomfortably at his long moustache. At last:

"Missus," he said. "They've taken him."

II

At Fleddon Park the sudden aggravation of the tragedy had also consequence. No sooner had Felix ridden off to Maull, than Sir Harry took the rare step of confiding an opinion to his wife. The case that was to come before him on the morrow was now a serious one. He took judicial duties conscientiously and realised that, if the matter were to be referred beyond the petty sessions, it must be sent forward fully documented. His responsibility and that of his fellow-magistrates was far graver than when the question had been one of mere assault. Drunken brawling was not rare in Fleddon, and on Show nights in particular had many precedents. But now matters had gone far beyond a drunken brawl. The old gentleman was worried and less his opinionated self than normally. Seeing him frowning over his cigar, Lady Ormond ventured comment.

"It is very disagreeable this terrible thing happening in Fleddon," she said. "There has been nothing of the kind since we were married, Harry."

He grunted.

"Did you know the poor man?" she asked.

"I have seen him with Felix once or twice. Not a pleasant-looking fellow, but Felix says he knew his work."

For a moment she watched him, sullen and smoking moodily.

"You are worried, are you not? I am so sorry."

"It is natural to be worried, Mary. One dislikes cases of this kind. Besides, it is particularly distressing that the man Martindale should be involved. Felix told me last night of something Crossley overheard on the Showfield which makes the suspicion graver. I suppose Crossley will be summoned to give evidence. Felix has ridden off to Maull with the news of Slatter's death. They will have to arrest this fellow Martindale now. The inspector will be up to see me in a few moments. They will jail him—and to-morrow I have to sit in public judgment on a man that I have turned out of my house for private reasons. It is embarrassing—more than embarrassing. I am only human, after all. Yet a magistrate must have no private bias. I would give a great deal for this never to have happened."

Lady Ormond, standing behind his chair, stroked his bald head.

"It is dreadful, Harry. I am sorrier than I can say. And poor Cathy——"

He sat up with a jerk.

"What! Why 'poor Cathy'? Mary, you are a fool! It's the chit's fault that we are all in this infernal position. And you say 'poor Cathy'!"

He subsided, snorting.

"I meant," explained Lady Ormond timidly, "that she must have been cruelly deceived.

This terrible man must have bewitched her. She will be heart-broken, Harry, to think that he should be capable of——"

Sir Harry, looking for quarrels in his irritation, snapped at her:

"I am always telling you, Mary, that no man is guilty till he is proved to be so. You must not jump to conclusions in this way. It is difficult enough for me to keep an open mind about a man for whom I have the greatest personal hostility, without your confusing the issues in this frivolous manner."

She sighed.

"I do not want to be hard," she said. "Of course I hope the young man can clear himself. But all the same——"

The sentence petered out. She wandered about the room, setting ornaments and books to rights. Then, with another sigh, drifted to the door and left her husband to himself. As she went upstairs, the inspector had just been admitted and was following the servant toward the library.

Her household duties done, Lady Ormond settled to her writing-table. But instead of to letters she fell to pondering. The thought of Catherine, isolated and unhappy at Laffeter, weighed on her. By Sir Harry's orders no letters from home had gone to the disobedient daughter during the weeks of her absence, and none had been received. The only news of her had come to Lady Ormond in her sister Julia's occasional correspondence and in notes from Charlotte. But for nearly a week even this indirect enlightenment had ceased. Now Charlotte had returned to Fleddon, but could give no account of Catherine that was not some days out of date, and the few facts (thus obsolete) that she could tell were unimportant generalities. Catherine was well; seemed cheerful; spent her time mainly with Lucretia and withdrawn from the chatter of the ladies of the house-party. Lady Ormond now realised that her anxiety to know more of her younger daughter had for some while been growing. The shock of the Fleddon tragedy woke her to appreciation of Catherine's loneliness. However wrong of her it was to persist in this foolish love-affair against her father's wishes and in defiance of all social seemliness, she was only a young girl, little fitted by experience to live alone and bear the pains of exile. But when the awful news of Slatter's death arrived? How then would it be with her? There would not lack older heads to tell her of the serious turn affairs had taken. Even if the Duke himself made no comment—seeing the new developments (as surely he would) in the *Sawley Advertiser*—there were servants to gossip or the old housekeeper at Laffeter to shake her head over the outrage now so gravely magnified. "Poor little Catherine!" thought the uneasy mother.

And the next moment—"Ought I to go to her?" The more she pondered this idea, the more it captured her. The vision of her child, stricken to misery by the exposure of the man's real character who all uncannily had won her love, strengthened in Lady Ormond that maternal courage that had already once daunted Sir Harry's despotism. She felt a great strength of purpose rise within her. Ringing the bell, she summoned Charlotte by the maid.

"My dear," she said. "I think that to-morrow I shall drive to Laffeter to see Catherine."

"Why, mamma—all of a sudden like this?"

"If it is sudden, Charlotte, the fault lies in my not going sooner. I am anxious as to how she will bear this terrible trouble—the man Slatter dying, I mean, and the consequences to—the other man. Oh, how difficult it is!"

"But, mamma, can you go without—well, admitting this—this infatuation?"

Lady Ormond sighed.

"It is very difficult. . . ." She brooded a moment, then broke out: "Oh, Charlotte, she will need comforting! She is all alone there—and so young! I feel I must go—whatever else. . . ."

Her voice trailed off to something like a sob. Charlotte made no further argument.

"Very well, dearest. Of course you must

do what you think best. Would you wish me to come with you?"

"That would be very nice, dear, and I'm sure Catherine——" Absently she turned the pages of her calendar. "Well, I declare! I had forgotten the Mothers' Institute! It is their Sale of Work to-morrow! And I told Mrs. Carter to come over about the Blanket Fund. Oh dear, oh dear! What a number of things there are to think of!"

She gazed in perplexity at the littered writing-table. The rare decisions of the indecisive bring in their train bewilderment. Charlotte smiled.

"Never mind, mamma. I will stay behind. Then you will not be worried. Give Cathy my love. Now you must do your letters, and I have all the flowers to see to."

Left to herself Lady Ormond fingered her letters absent-mindedly. She was already wondering how Sir Harry would receive the plan of visiting Laffeter. At first she thought to declare her purpose on the spot, while yet determination glowed within her. But on reflection, she decided that to inform him late at night would be more prudent. Somewhat shamefacedly, she admitted to herself that she would take advantage of his vexation over the morrow's bench. He would be chagrined and preoccupied; little inclined to add domestic prohibition to his other cares. Thus, feebly guileful, reasoned the poor lady, and found relief in her procrastination.

The day passed uneventfully. At dinner Felix appeared with plastered lip. He was surly and uncommunicative, mumbling indistinctly that a horse had kicked him in the mouth, that the blow was not serious and that his mother need not worry him. He had little to tell of his day's journey, save that the death of Slatter had been duly announced to Philip Crossley.

"Then Crossley will be in Sawley tomorrow?" demanded his father.

Felix shrugged.

"Presumably" he said.

At nine o'clock Sir Harry sat smoking in his library. He had just had another and a discomposing call from the inspector. Frank Martindale had been arrested near Laffeter and was lodged for the night in Sawley jail. The man was cut and bruised about the face, but would give no explanation of his injuries, neither would he say what business had taken him so far from home. The police were dissatisfied with the whole case. The inspector hoped Sir Harry understood that they had only applied for a warrant on the strong representation of the dead Slatter's solicitor, who quoted in support of his demand the name of Felix Ormond. Mr. Ormond it was who had persuaded Greensmith to engage a lawyer for his assistant and, now that the victim of the assault had died, this representative had become active and troublesome. He had pressed for the charge to be made one of murder, but this the police had taken the responsibility of refusing, in view of the other circumstances of the case, which implied provocation and certainly did not give to the original assault an appearance of deliberate intent to kill. The solicitor had had perforce to be content with a prosecution for manslaughter. He had informed the police that Mr. Philip Crossley of Maull could give evidence in support of the indictment. A man had been despatched to Maull that afternoon and, after waiting for an hour, had seen Mr. Crossley, who declared that he would appear before the bench at Sawley and bear his witness.

" Mr. Crossley refused information as to the nature of his evidence," the inspector had told Sir Harry ruefully. " Even when our man quoted Mr. Ormond's description of it as repeated to us by Slatter's lawyer, he would neither confirm nor deny it. He would give evidence before the magistrates and before no one else."

Sir Harry grunted, while the inspector scratched his head.

" It's no real case, sir," he had concluded. " All the evidence of character is the other way. As you know, sir, the victim himself, who at first accused this Martindale, later withdrew and qualified his statement. If it were not for the difference Mr. Crossley's tale might make, I believe the superintendent would drop it altogether."

And he had then withdrawn, leaving the old gentleman much disturbed in mind. He was preoccupied less with the police view of the case's flimsiness than with the detail of the prisoner's damaged face. The man was found near Laffeter. Felix had returned from Maull with plaster on his mouth and, to Sir Harry's mind, an obvious falsehood to account for it. If indeed the two had met and fought, his position as magistrate would be intolerable. This Martindale would have legal representation before the bench and his solicitor would not hesitate to make all possible play with a quarrel between the prisoner and one of the witnesses for the prosecution. Sir Harry cursed his son for a fool and even rose to ring and send for him. But with his hand on the bell-rope he changed his mind and returned to his armchair and his uncomfortable thoughts. He would question Felix later; for the moment he must envisage his deplorable dilemma.

When his wife entered, he growled ungraciously. Poor Lady Ormond, who had so ingeniously chosen this most unlucky moment for declaring her intentions, trembled but stood her ground.

"Harry," she said. "I will not disturb you for more than a minute. I thought of going over to Laffeter to-morrow to see Catherine."

To her surprise he did not shout at her, but replied instantly:

"Then bring her home with you. She's better under my eye. I believe that fellow Martindale has been over there to see her. If it is so, she has been deliberately disobedient and must be punished."

"Oh, Harry, I am sure she would not do such a thing! Do not be harsh with her! You will remember how young she is?"

The old gentleman grumbled and took up a book, as though to show that he had no more to say. At this moment the door opened and Catherine herself walked into the room. The parents stared as at a ghost, and indeed she was pale enough for any spectre. Then Lady Ormond ran to her:

"Catherine! Where have you come from?"

The girl replied steadily:

"From Laffeter, mamma. Lucretia was kind and sent me over. I want to speak to you and to papa—and to Felix if he's here."

Sir Harry rose, stiff-jointed menace, from his chair.

"How dare you . . . !" he began; but his wife caught his arm.

"No, Harry! Let the child speak." Then to Catherine anxiously, "Are you ill, darling? You look so white!"

"I am tired mamma, but not ill. Is Felix here? Will you please send for him?"

The controlled weariness with which she spoke checked even the father's indignation. He rang the bell. Until the servant came and while he was absent fetching Felix, two of the three that waited fidgeted uneasily. The old man was restless and grumbled a little to himself; the mother sat nervously in a chair, and her clasped hands worked convulsively. But Catherine did not sit, standing quite motionless and with eyes downcast.

Felix, as he came into the room, started at seeing Catherine and stifled an exclamation. Immediately she began to speak:

"Listen, please. Things have taken place to-day that you must know. In the first place, Mr. Crossley called on me at Laffeter."

"In the first place? You are keeping your meeting with your lover to yourself?" sneered Felix.

"No," answered his sister quietly. "I shall tell everything."

"Tell it in order then," retorted Felix.

His mother signed to him to hold his peace, and even Sir Harry growled for silence. Catherine resumed:

"Mr. Crossley called and spoke to me of—of——" She swallowed and went bravely on: "of Mr. Martindale's connection with this case that you, papa, will judge to-morrow. He told me (what Felix already knows) that on the afternoon of the Show here he heard Frank say threatening things of the poor man who has just died. He offered, if I would pay the price, to suppress his knowledge or even to contradict what he first stated." The recollection of her interview with Crossley broke for a moment her unnatural composure. She set her teeth, but her lips trembled and Lady Ormond went quickly to her side.

"Catherine—can you not leave this till to-morrow? You are all wrought up, darling. Go and rest."

But the girl shook her head, whispering:

"I shall be all right in a moment, mamma. Let me be." There was a moment's silence and she proceeded:

"I sent him away—almost without a word. He is angry and will do what harm to—to Mr. Martindale he can. I want *you* to know, papa, that what he will declare to-morrow against Fr—— against Mr. Martindale would, if I had done the mean thing that he asked of me, have been the very opposite. Knowing that, you will not value his evidence very highly."

Felix laughed.

"You are a fool! What Crossley says on oath will be believed. As if your tale-bearing——"

"I have not finished 'tale-bearing' yet, Felix," she interrupted, speaking more loudly now. "I am coming to another part of this horrible afternoon. Papa—you must believe me when I say that I have made no attempt at Laffeter to meet Mr. Martindale. You did not forbid me to write to him, so write I did; but to arrange a meeting would have been disobedience. I do not want to be disobedient, papa"—her voice broke suddenly—"but I cannot control my heart now; it is given away."

"Pshaw! Don't talk sentimental rubbish!" barked Sir Harry. "If I had my way you would be packed off to bed this minute and locked in your room."

"Harry! Harry!" cried Lady Ormond, warningly.

"Thank you, mamma," said Catherine, and hurried on for fear her tremors should once more betray her. "This afternoon, when I was out riding, I met Mr. Martindale. He had come over to find me——"

"There!" shouted Felix. "She admits it! The blackguard goes sneaking after her——"

She turned on him in a flame of rage.

"Be quiet! You have done harm enough to-day——"

Sir Harry, to Felix' surprise and disillusionment, fixed his son with angry eyes.

"Hold your tongue, boy! I wish to hear what your sister has to tell."

The young man scowled and, sauntering down the room, stood with his back to the small group by the fireplace.

Catherine continued:

"He came to tell me of the trouble at Fleddon and to bid good-bye. We were talking and Felix came on us suddenly:

"Ah!" from Sir Harry. "I thought as much. Come here, Felix! You fought this man!"

"No, papa!" cried Catherine excitedly. "He ſtruck him—oh, savagely—across the face! Frank was ſtanding below him, unsuspecting and unarmed—and—and—oh, it was horrible—horrible——!"

She broke down completely, and bitter sobbing shook her from head to foot.

"Did he ſtrike you back, Felix?" demanded the father.

The young man hesitated. At laſt:

"No," he said sullenly.

"Then your cut mouth—about which you told that cock-and-bull ſtory at dinner? Don't lie to me! Who ſtruck you if this Martindale did not?"

The answer came from Catherine. With tear-filled eyes, and cheeks all wet with weeping, she threw the words into her brother's face:

"I did!" she cried, triumphant. "I did, papa!"

The old gentleman, for a moment ſtaggered, ſtared at his son and daughter wildly. Then waved his arms as though to drive away a cloud of teasing flies.

"Get out, all of you!" he roared. "Get out and leave me!"

III

Next morning, at the petty sessional court at Sawley, a groom in Ormond livery presented a note. It brought Sir Harry Ormond's regrets that he was indisposed and unable to attend the bench that day. The clerk to the justices was begged to advise the senior magistrate present of the chairman's absence. Sir Harry's place was promptly taken by Mr. Moreton Ashworth, who proceeded to deal with the few indictable offences.

By far the most important, and one which attracted a considerable crowd, was the case for manslaughter preferred against Frank Martindale of Fleddon. But it proved very mild sensationalism from the outset. Two of the most important witnesses for the police did not appear. One, Mr. Felix Ormond, was absent without explanation; the other, the Honourable Philip Crossley, son of Lord Lypiatt of Maull, sent word that he was prevented from attending by the sudden and dangerous sinking of his father, whose death was expected at every hour; he asked that the case be, if possible, adjourned.

Ashworth considered his position. The town of Fleddon and the personality of Felix were alike distasteful to him. They were reminders of an experience that he desired immensely to forget. He had reached home on the evening of the Agricultural Show to find no balm in his escape, but only shame for his own cowardice. Then, the next day, had come a deputation of Lean's friends who, for all their civility, seemed by their very coming to reproach him for his failure. He had almost pleaded with them. What more—now that the Show was over and, with it, his official privilege—could he achieve? Fleddon was not his business. He would do more harm than good, were he now to force himself into the local problems of Sir Harry Ormond's district. He promised that, if opportunity were to offer, he would remember his visitors' contention; he even went so far as to express sympathy with their point of view. Then had they taken leave, dissatisfied but perforce acquiescent, leaving Ashworth nervously content with his diplomacy. The fair words had seemed safe amiability at the time. What occasion for renewed interference in affairs at Fleddon *could* arise? None; save by a miracle—none at all.

The miracle had happened. As soon as he knew Sir Harry would be absent from the bench, Ashworth recognised in his chance chairmanship an opportunity for the redeeming of his pledge. Hazard had made him once again a judge over Fleddon. Was he again to fail?

Against irresolution he armed himself with all the hatred for Felix he could muster. Now was the time at once to keep his word with George Lean's friends and to pay a private score with Ormond insolence. He knew enough of the case before him to realise that Crossley's desire for an adjournment would be

Felix' also. The fact decided him. Adjournment was refused.

From that moment Ashworth's task was simple. The prosecution, limply presented, fell of its own flimsiness. Frank's lawyer put in evidence of character and challenged the police to produce a detail in their own support that was not purely secondary or conjectural.

The magistrate demanded to know who had scarred the face of the accused. Frank intimated that he preferred not to reply; the matter had nothing to do with the case. Then Frank's lawyer rose and asked that his client's wishes be respected, unless the prosecution desired to press the matter. He passed a slip of paper to his colleague, who bit his lip, gave the paper to the chairman and sat down. Ashworth read the document carefully. A fierce pleasure thrilled him. It only needed this to convince him of his own wisdom and efficiency. The enemy were delivered into his hand. After an impressive pause, "The charge is a frivolous one," he declared loftily, "and should never have been brought. The case is dismissed."

Ten minutes later Frank walked down the steps of the Sawley police court a free man. Friends from Fleddon awaited him, to shake his hand and cry congratulation. Then George Lean, shining with triumph, clapped him on the back.

" The young lady saved ye," he whispered slyly.

" Young lady ? What young lady ? What do you mean ? "

" Just this," replied the farmer in Frank's ear. " She come and told me last night who cut your face up and bade me see that folks here knew it too. I told the lawyer chap. That's what I mean."

Frank blew his nose with a large white silk handkerchief, burying embarrassment in its folds.

" You are a good fellow, Lean," he said, " and I am eternally grateful for all you've done for me. I must be off. My mother is waiting for me at the Swan."

" I'll step round with ye ; not to stay, only to shake her by the hand. She's had a cruel time of it, and I've a fancy to see 'er smile again."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I

With Frank's release, the mystery of the assault on Slatter passes outside the compass of this tale. Presumably inquiries went their patient way, but whether so and what the outcome are not recorded. The fact of the release, however, was in itself significant. It slackened sudden tension and set the minds of many free to face new problems or to return to old ones still unsolved. At first reaction ruled and an unreal peace. A queer stagnation settled upon Sir Harry Ormond's family and home. Felix, to escape his father's anger and the unbearable discomfort of meeting Catherine a dozen times a day, left Fleddon hastily. Sir Harry, deeply ashamed of having shirked his duty and yet thankful to have done so, lurked in his library and hardly dared to leave the room for fear the fiction of his illness be too blatantly exposed. His meals were sent in to him, and for two days he hardly saw his wife and his daughters not at all.

Did he foresee, perhaps, conflict with Catherine? If so, he had no doubts of its result. He would as easily have conceived a super-tax as compromise between parental rule and daughter's wilfulness.

Lady Ormond, on the other hand, was fearfully (if miſtily) aware that the real riddle of the future was unsolved. The tragedy of Slatter, which even at Fleddon Park had obscured all other issues by its dramatic urgency, was but a vivid overlay on the less glaring but more ſtubborn texture of Catherine's unsanctioned love-affair. Indeed this latter might have become the more abiding for the quick transience of its surface pattern. What fresh allurement to a love-ensorcelled girl would not shine out from a forbidden lover, falsely accused and now reſtored to her, but ſtill forbidden? In realising this (although by inſtinct rather than by intellect) was Lady Ormond shrewder than her husband. But then she tried in her uncertain way to look ahead; while he, having evaded (none too creditably) one immediate difficulty, did not irk himself with looking for another, but enjoyed peace—even a false peace—where he found it.

Having conceived, in general outline, the bulk of her perplexity, Lady Ormond considered its component parts. She underſtood (as did Sir Harry also but could not have been brought to say so) that Crossley as a suitor was by his own act obliterated. He had the Barony of Lypiatt now, but not the glory of a marquisate could have removed the ugly ſtain with which, by Ormond code, he had defaced himself. So far, however, from his disappearance making things easier, it multiplied embarrassment. Had they reached deadlock?

What was to happen now? The elimination of Crossley did not imply the acceptance of Frank Martindale. Would not Sir Harry likely be the more obstinate against his daughter's misalliance for the unworthiness of the now useless son-in-law that he himself had chosen? The mother guessed that Catherine's will was no more pliable than her father's. What outcome could there be, save one that either broke a daughter's heart or brought a husband to unprecedented and to dangerous rage? Deadlock indeed!

At present, yes; but only for a time! Then one side would break out and war begin. Poor Lady Ormond questioned her own heart. To which side would it, when battle joined, incline? There came two answers, which together blended into none at all. Training and habit and the contented instincts that they bring cried out against the lowering of caste and cried the louder against scandal. To marry badly was, to one of her upbringing, almost to live in sin. The girl whose marriage was unsuitable strayed from the safe bright plateau of her friends and relatives, slipped on the edge, and vanished to some sordid gulf, between whose depths and the comfortable levels she had left was no communication, save on the sly and questionably. She shuddered to imagine one of her own daughters thus degraded. How should she meet her world as formerly, if Catherine's had become a name unmentionable or, among intimates, a cause for sudden silence and commiserating undertones? Yet something of the kind would happen—must happen—if matters came to an extremity. The mother did not blink the fact. You cannot keep a girl for ever prisoner and, when she saw her opportunity, Catherine would run away. What scandal then! The unhappy lady recalled Letitia Anstruther, who not a month ago had whispered of a girl they both had met that she had run away with a music-teacher and well-nigh broken her poor mother's heart. Letitia had been lavish of regrets and disapproving cries, but in her telling of the tale—for all the sympathy poured out at the forsaken mother's shrine—there had been relish, even eagerness. Should the Letitia Anstruthers of London and the countryside smear Fleddon and Fleddon's daughter Catherine with their sham-reluctant gossip? Was she herself—Mary Ormond—with melancholy gratitude to accept their murmured sympathy, suspecting all the time that each compassionate dowager was smiling covertly among her friends at the disgraceful comedy of young Miss Catherine and the local vet? Thus clamoured in poor Lady Ormond's ears the voices of social usage and propriety.

But these no sooner made their protest

heard, than the sweet singing of romance and the undying music of young love soothed her maternal anxieties and roused her womanhood. Catherine and this shadowy young man had found each other out. Instinctive love was always beautiful, and the girl so clung to hers that the mother knew better than to take Sir Harry's lead and brush the whole aside as silly sentiment. It was no foolish fancy for a handsome face that had brought Catherine at her lover's side to brave her father in his library; that had given her strength and anger to strike Felix in the face; that had sent Crossley shamed from Laffeter; that had prompted the night-drive from Laffeter to Fleddon; that had so conquered weariness that she could face her parents and her injured brother and overcome them all. With all its unwisdom and its unrestraint, Catherine's love for Martindale was love indeed, and Lady Ormond did it homage, feeling its honour and its loveliness, conscious, despite herself, of its impregnability.

But, fair and stirring as it was, it frightened her. When she was young, a girl's affection surely ran more peaceably? She had been comfortably in love with Harry Ormond—hers was no obligatory marriage of convenience—but she could not conceive the Mary Tressider of thirty-seven years ago speaking so boldly and so frankly of a permitted love for her betrothed, as Catherine had done of love for one unrecognised. She could admire her daughter's courage, but still tremble for her recklessness. Even now, and after all that had occurred, Catherine went her way unshrinking. In daylight and quite openly she had sought out Frank Martindale, the very day that he returned from Sawley. Lady Ormond had seen the girl go running down the park, gaily as ever maiden ran to meet her lover. Had not Sir Harry been library-bound by his imaginary illness, he must have seen her too! Had he done so, then would the time of armistice have been short indeed! Wherefore Lady Ormond was glad that only she had seen the truant. And for another reason also. The sight, much as she disapproved of it, had thrilled her, and in that thrill—the like of which she had not felt for more than thirty years—thoughts of betrayal or reproof were lost.

Bewildered, then, good Lady Ormond hovered between rebuke to Catherine and wondering respect. Now, as the voices of propriety grew loud, she would be resolute and steel herself to face this threat to Ormond probity and help her husband to dispel it; but in the moment of determination, the heady perfume of romance would rise enchantingly, and she would turn away from where the danger lurked and for a while longer let things take their sweetly perilous course.

As thus. One day, among the many letters, was one from Mrs. Anstruther.

"You recall doubtless," ran one paragraph, "the sad story of Sophia Clayton and the music-teacher? Poor Mrs. Clayton! How I feel for her! I saw her yesterday and she is aged out of all knowledge. I fear the headstrong girl has found unhappiness—as indeed she deserves. They tell me the man drinks and, of course, much of his employment with nice people has been brought to an end. One can hardly expect any mother of daughters to desire such a person in the house. If it were only Sophia who suffered, I would have nothing to say; as we make our beds, so must we lie. But that her mother and all her relations should go about with this dreadful shadow on them! Of course, everybody knows the whole story. People gossip so of these things. I am sure I always think that if only folk would hold their tongues about matters that do not concern them, the world would be a happier place. . . ."

This letter reached Lady Ormond after an uneasy night, and found her readier to accept its pessimism than to criticise its logic. Chance would have it that, as she left the breakfast-room, she came on Catherine with her little writing desk under her arm and sheets of closely written paper in her hand.

"Where are you going to write, my dear?"

"In the morning-room, mamma. It is cold outside and beginning to rain. I went to the summer-house to read my letter, but found it chilly."

"Who is the long letter from? I did not see it at breakfast."

"From Frank."

Perhaps the abruptness of the words or something in the calm tone of them stirred Lady Ormond to break a lance for etiquette.

"Come to my room, dear. I would like to talk to you."

When the door was shut, she was prepared with her exordium.

"Please tell me, Catherine, how that letter reached you."

"I went to meet the postman, mamma."

"Is that a proper thing to do, my dear?"

"Proper, mamma? What do you mean? I was anxious to have it—naturally. Why is it improper to meet the postman?"

"While you are under your father's roof, Catherine, you should not act in an underhand way."

For a moment the girl stared uncomprehending at her mother. As the sense of the words declared themselves, she flushed.

"There is nothing underhand about it! I was impatient. Were you never impatient, mamma, when news was coming from your lover?"

Lady Ormond shifted uneasily. She did not like the use of the word 'lover' in this personal connection. It sounded almost as though she were accused of some disreputable fondness in her young days, other than that legitimately felt for Harry Ormond.

"I hardly think, dear, that so trivial an incident requires quite so high-sounding a defence. But while we are talking of this subject, I must ask you not to go down into Fleddon by yourself. Your father would not like it."

"But, mamma!" exclaimed the astonished Catherine, "I have walked in Fleddon alone ever since I was a child!"

"Never mind what you did when you were a child. You are now a young lady and young ladies cannot be too careful. Besides, you know well enough what I mean. I saw you going towards Park Corner two days ago while—while your father was—was—unwell."

Catherine laughed.

"Oh, I see! I didn't understand, mamma; truly I didn't. No, I shan't go and see Frank any more. He's gone to London."

There was no trace of hesitation in her manner. Serenely she could speak of her unlicensed lover and to her mother's face. To Lady Ormond, now considerably vexed, the easy confidence rang derisively.

She spoke sharply:

"Catherine! You must not forget yourself. I have been sorry for all you have been through, but you must remember that the fault was your own ſtubbornness. Do not assume, because this—this—because the unpleasant affair of the other day did not turn out seriously—that everything is simple and permitted. Your disobedience to your father remains. Remember that!"

Catherine with a deep sigh turned away and ſtood looking down into the pleasant flame of the log-fire that spoke, snugly but ominously, of autumn's chill. For a while she did not answer.

"Well, Catherine?"

The girl, her back toward her mother, spoke pleadingly:

"Mamma, why muſt we go on like this? Won't you and papa truſt me a little bit? I am not a child now and I assure you that my mind is quite, quite made up."

"But, my dear, girls muſt obey their parents who know so much better what is seemly and prudent. I am not satisfied with your attitude, Catherine. You seem at times almoſt to flaunt this—this——"

She ſtopped, baulked by her own prepossessions and by the wishes (as she underſtood them) of her husband. She could not speak of 'love' to Catherine nor utter the man's name who had appeared from nowhere, as it were, to trouble them. But neither could she so insult the child as to use scornful phrasing, and hint that her enchantment was extravagant perversity. Wherefore she broke off, precariously.

Catherine had left the fireplace and, standing by her mother's chair, said earnestly:

"Mamma, I am afraid you do not quite understand. Between Frank and me there can be no going back. I am not ashamed of loving him. Why should I be? You have known what love is, mamma. You can feel as I feel, if you will only *believe* when I tell you that there can be no other love for me but this. It is no use the whole world frowning and making difficulties; the thing remains. I do not care about the world; but I *do* care about you, mamma. Why must you and papa be displeased with me, when I might be so wonderfully happy? Dear mamma, won't you try to understand?"

Lady Ormond was touched. Indeed, of the two she was the nearer tears. From sternness she fell back on common prudence.

"But, Catherine—of course I want your happiness more than anything. You know that, darling. It is the practical side I do not see clearly. You will not think I am without sympathy if I say that this is perhaps more important than you at present realise? Quite apart from your father's objections—which are——" (she sighed) "as great as ever, this—er—Frank of yours—has he means to marry?"

"He has gone to London to see about some work that Mr. Hugh Crossley is helping him to get. Mr. Hugh Crossley was telegraphed for to Maull when the old man fell ill, but he arrived too late at the junction to get on in time. He saw Frank then at Sawley."

"But how are they acquainted, Catherine?"

"Oh, it happened earlier, mamma—when the other Mr. Crossley first came here. Frank told me afterwards. Hugh Crossley was splendid to him and offered to help any time he could. So I suppose when he heard of the trouble and was in Sawley, he found Frank and—and—well, was told all about it."

"I see," said Lady Ormond thoughtfully. "I did not know anything of this. So Mr. Crossley knows of some work——"

"Yes—or so I believe. I do not know much about it. Frank told me vaguely that it was with a railway company. I wonder why they should need a veterinary surgeon? It seems curious, does it not? Oh, well—so long as they do! If Frank gets the post, he will settle in London and his mother will go to him and——"

For the first time Catherine appeared confused. She coloured gloriously and bent her head.

"And what, dear?" asked Lady Ormond.

"—and so shall I, mamma," she whispered.

The mother sat back in her chair, anxious but greatly moved.

"Run along now, darling," she said, patting her daughter's hand. "It is very perplexing. I wish your father——" She paused; then added shyly: "Poor little Catherine. . . ."

II

Outside the door Catherine met her sister. Charlotte looked sourly and the big account book that she carried stressed her morosity.

"I wish you would help me with some of these figures!" she said peevishly. "You haven't done a thing for weeks."

"What are they?" asked Catherine. "The dairy or the rents?"

"Those and the household accounts as well. They balance all wrong. I've lost six pounds thirteen shillings."

"Well, that's more creditable than if you had as much too much. Mamma says that in that case you've had something without paying for it, while having too little—After all, you can always make it up!"

"That's another thing," said Charlotte crossly. "It's your turn to make up. I've done it for three months at least."

Catherine laughed.

"When *you've* made the mistake! I'd rather go over the additions and see if I can't find it. I'll come in an hour, Lottie. I must write a letter. Then I'll come, honour bright!"

Charlotte ungraciously passed on and heard, with a twinge of irritation, her sister's feet go hurrying up the stairs. These were dark days for Charlotte. Her plans had sadly gone awry, and through no fault of hers. Another month or two and she would have had a chance of testing her own skilfulness. It was that unlucky Slatter episode that had forestalled her, that had lured Crossley to the foolish spitefulness at Laffeter. He was a fool. Charlotte had always known he was a fool for all his cleverness, and had reckoned for her own success on just the weakness that had so cruelly undone her. If Slatter had not died, Crossley would not have thought to go to Catherine till the appointed interval had passed. Before then, old Lord Lypiatt would have been dead. Nothing could in such circumstances have been more opportune. The death would have prevented the new peer seeking forthwith a wife. He would have postponed his call on Catherine, busying himself in the meantime with all the traffic of succession. Dignity and the grave ordering of his possessions would inevitably have grown on him. If, during this period, he had not more than once encountered Charlotte Ormond, the fault would not have lain with her. And when at last he turned about and thought of Catherine? Either, if she were still unwed and within reach, she would refuse him; or she would have gone, and her vacant place would be her most effectual answer.

But all such possibilities had vanished with the unlucky hazard of events. Lord Lypiatt would be a stranger now to Fleddon. Sir

Harry had gone to the old man's funeral, but had returned taciturn, and did not mention Philip Crossley's name. The severance would be complete. Poor Charlotte's bold design had failed. At twenty-eight women watch chances slip with tightening of the heart.

"I am an old maid born," she told herself resentfully. "The stars in their courses are against me."

Her spleen turned against Catherine. Her sister's love affair she once had welcomed and with real sympathy. Now, however, this unsuitable attachment was itself an irritation and, in its possibilities, a menace. To watch Catherine move in a dreamy rapture about the house was sometimes more than Charlotte, sore with her disappointment, could endure. To contemplate (from the point of view of the unmarried elder sister left behind at home) the upshot of a marriage, whether politely tolerated or defiantly achieved, between Catherine and a man of inferior social rank was wholly terrible.

If Lady Ormond trembled to think herself the mother of a girl unclassed, how much more tragically must Charlotte feel, who was that same girl's sister and before whom life—or most of it—still solitary lay?

She could hear herself spoken of: "Ah, yes! the sister of the girl who made that unfortunate marriage! (A piano-tuner, was it not? A vet? Oh; I had heard wrongly.) Very difficult position for her—left at home like that. Is she a young girl? Really? Twenty-eight? As much as that!" Or by more intimate friends: "Poor Charlotte! We are all *so* sorry for her! It's so cruel on a girl when something goes—well, not exactly *wrong* in a family; but a little—a little out of the ordinary! And it is not as though she were a child any longer. That makes beginning again so hard, does it not?"

What man would seek a girl—a girl of twenty-eight—thus branded by a sister's indiscretion? Were there not half a thousand girls as amply dowered as Charlotte, fairer, younger, and with no awkward misalliance to be ignored politely or in expansive moments to be smiled over? Charlotte would close her eyes and see an unbroken vista of virginity and (crueller still) of powerlessness stretch to a lonely grave. She knew her talents, chafed to feel her helplessness. Year after year she would still slave at her accounts, still sweep with dignity to church, still play the social second to her mother and, unapplauded, make smooth her mother's way.

All this and more of acrimony provoked outside their mother's boudoir door her churlishness to Catherine. All this of bitterness and more lingered unspoken in her heart and festered there.

III

The seventh day of truce that followed Slatter's death was wild and wet. Wind buffeted the hills of Fleddon, sweeping in sudden gusts about the buttress *massif* of the Park. Rain blurred the windows, soaked into the casement crevices, and from unending clouds poured down on trees and shrubs that, restless in the gale, shook off the drops as soon as fallen and made the sodden earth more sodden still.

Catherine sat at a window of the morning-room that commanded the approach to the front door. She was expecting some one, for from time to time she would look up from her sewing, watching the rain-swept drive for an approaching visitor. When at last appeared the figure of a man, she threw her work aside and ran into the hall. On the mat, stamping his feet, and disentangling his head from the hood of a tarpaulin cape, stood, as she opened the front door, Hugh Crossley.

"What a day, Miss Catherine!" he exclaimed. "I fear I am behind time."

She gave him her hand, smiling welcome.

"Poor man, to be out in this downpour! Are you very wet? I hardly knew if you would come."

"Of course I came," he said, stripping his cape and scrubbing vigorously at his boots. "Well, you have heard the good news?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Crossley! Isn't it wonderful? And all your doing! Frank writes that the whole thing is due to you."

"Pooh, pooh! Not a bit of it. He's the man for the job, and they knew it. I only gave a hint."

They were in the morning-room now and, as he stood and smiled at the small serious figure of his hostess, he told himself again (as he had once already told Frank Martindale) that the girl was indeed a thoroughbred. She met his gaze very simply and collectedly.

"You know how grateful I am—how grateful we both are—don't you, Mr. Crossley? I cannot say a mere 'thank you' for all that you have done."

"Do not say a word, Miss Catherine. I shall have more than a fair reward for my tiny share of it when, as best man, I see you two in church.

She blushed; then sighed and looked away.

"I wish——" she began unsteadily.

He gave a quick glance and, to relieve her, spoke:

"The main reason of my coming, apart from bringing you sincere congratulation, was to see Lady Ormond. Is she at liberty? It is not that I want to interfere, Miss Catherine, but sometimes an outsider——"

"Oh, Mr. Crossley! But you have had trouble enough——" As he shook his head with humorous impatience, she added:

"I will go and tell mamma. Before I go may I say how grieved I was to hear of Lord Lypiatt's—of your father's death? There has been no opportunity before."

"Thank you for your sympathy. I hope, however, that he is happier now. He was very old and frail. Did you hear of his strange fancy to die in the Yew Room?"

Catherine started. The ancient sunlit space of tousled grass; the plaintive daisies round the sun-dial's base; the grim black shadow of the enshadowed wall of yew—one by one the features of that queer seclusion took shape in memory.

"And did he—really?" she breathed.

He nodded.

"The last words he spoke were a command to carry him there. Ten minutes later he was dead."

She bowed her head.

"Poor old man," she murmured. "Poor, lonely, fanciful old man. . . ."

They stood in silence. Then Catherine, with a nervous smile, recollected herself and said:

"Please excuse me, Mr. Crossley. I will run and tell mamma that you are here."

He was alone with Lady Ormond. At first she was reserved, unable to forget that this man was the brother of one who had abused Ormond confidence. But his sincerity and candour won her over.

" I am not so impertinent," he said earnestly, " as to suggest how you and Sir Harry should order your private affairs. My position in the matter is simply this. The man that Miss Catherine wishes to marry is now in a position that means a steady, if a modest income. I am perfectly certain that he is an upright good fellow, who will do his work well and advance in his profession. Of course, the wife of a veterinary surgeon, however established and successful, will not live on the scale of Fleddon Park. She will have a small home and a simple one. Judged by *your* standards Lady Ormond, she will be a poor man's wife. But—well, I do not think the young lady measures happiness in sterling."

" No, no," said Lady Ormond hastily, " nor would I have her do so. But it is so—so—unaccustomed, Mr. Crossley. I try to judge what it will be like—I mean, how our life and hers will blend together—and I cannot see it. Must she be exiled, Mr. Crossley ? I do not want to lose her."

" Alas ! I have much less experience for guessing that than you," he replied, shaking his head. " Will it not greatly depend on the good sense of this man Martindale ? You can be assured that he is not the person to make things difficult. He will not force himself on you or make display in public of his wife's connections."

" I do not quite mean that, although Sir

Harry might raise that point. No—I want my daughter to be still my daughter—not a black sheep, however faintly black. Do you understand? Then, if she has children. . . . They will be my grandchildren, Mr. Crossley, and——"

Her eyes were suspiciously bright. He felt embarrassed and turned the subject.

"Sir Harry, Lady Ormond—does he speak at all about this matter?"

She shook her head.

"He will never agree to it," she said plaintively. "He gets so worked up—I am afraid to think what he would do if—if——"

Crossley nodded.

"Yes," he said drily, "and that is what will happen, if there is no other way."

"I know, I know," wailed the poor lady. "I have known that—oh, for days. That would be worst of all."

"You must tackle him on the subject, Lady Ormond. It will be painful, but it is the only chance. No one but you can do it."

She rocked herself unhappily to and fro.

"He is so proud," she murmured.

"Then," he said quickly, "the risk of scandal is your strongest argument!" Urgent he pressed his point. "What real scandal can there be in the quiet marriage of your daughter with this man? Not here—that would be impossible; in London somewhere. Just a handful of people. The thing will be forgotten in two days. Martindale is not a ploughboy, Lady Ormond! He is an educated man and a gentleman. If he is poor and works to keep himself—well, there are many more like him than are there men who need not work. But if the marriage is forbidden, if there is no countenancing of it by Sir Harry——" He spread out his hands. "It will take place just the same and give the journalists a fine romantic story! Is it not better to swallow a little pride than to read for a week in every newspaper columns of highly-coloured gossip about the runaway Miss Ormond and her hard-hearted parents? Is it not, Lady Ormond?" He paused then broke out again: "Besides, the tale will get an evil twist. Down here you do not feel what the great towns and the common folk are thinking. I know the men that I command and, first and last, I knock about a lot in queer corners of London. The big squires are not very popular, you know, and the towns are jealous of the countryside. How could you bear Miss Catherine to become the text for demagogues? How could Sir Harry endure to see his daughter vaunted as a rebel against tyrannous landlords who, just because they own the land, can live in idleness? I do not know your Fleddon. Probably the place is prosperous and quiet. But in some towns—where there are factories or mills—a story such as the radical rags could make of this story of Miss Catherine would make unpleasantness, if nothing worse. Is a little pride worth all this ?"

He seemed to have heard his own voice rising, for he broke off and, with a shy laugh, apologised for so much vehemence.

" Upon my soul, Lady Ormond, I talk like a stump-orator myself! I beg your pardon, and will run away. It is kind of you to let me speak of the matter at all. But I am interested, because I like the man and—if I may say so—the young lady also."

When he had gone the mother sat and frowned, and her heart palpitated and she was fearful and confused. It needed a real effort to decide her that she must face Sir Harry and be bold with him. The problem lay so far outside the province that she had been taught to think her own. How would a tempersome husband suffer her trespassing ? She shivered ; then called her courage back again. She must be ready for her opportunity, when it arrived.

IV

It came two days later and in terrifying guise. Sir Harry attended matins in the Abbey. He was punctilious as a churchgoer and followed every sentence wakefully. As he sat in the chief seat of the Ormond pew and gave attention to the incidental notices, now to be given out, there fell upon his unsuspecting ears these words :

" . . . . Between Catherine Julia Ormond, spinster, of this parish, and Francis Brook Martindale, bachelor, formerly of this parish, now of the parish of St. Aldegonde, Regent's Park."

The old gentleman's stupefaction was so great that the formal demand for declaration of a just impediment passed by unheard. For the remainder of the service he sat like a man stunned ; but, by the time he stepped out from his brougham at the door of home, his humours were very much themselves again.

Lady Ormond, who had been with him at church and knew what was coming, had hardly been able to rise from her knees after each spell of prayer for the terror that turned her limbs to water. She had seen from the corner of her eye the bulky figure stiffen, as the fatal words were said. After the service and all the way up the steep drive—as the horses straining, clopped over the muddy gravel—she held her breath and dared not steal even a fleeting glance at her so dangerously silent lord. As they stood in the hall and the butler removed Sir Harry's overcoat and took his hat, the old gentleman said with horrid courtesy :

" Please come to the library, Mary."

She summoned all she had of resolution and, when the door was shut, waited in silence for the storm to break. It broke, and raged un-interrupted till the gong boomed out for luncheon. Lady Ormond, who was now mistress of herself (having most fortunately been called upon only to listen and to quail and not, as yet, to argue), rose at the sound.

" There is luncheon, Harry. We will talk this matter over afterwards."

At luncheon the master hardly spoke. Once, glaring down the table under his bushy eyebrows, he demanded :

" Why were you not at church, Catherine ? "

The girl met his gaze, a little timidly but without wavering.

" I was, papa. But I was not ready when the carriage came and told mamma I would take the short cut. I sat at the back."

Sir Harry grunted and turned on his elder daughter.

" Were you at the back also, Charlotte ? "

" No, papa. I went to early service. I had accounts to finish and stayed at home."

" Sunday is not the day for accounts, girl," he growled. " Have you not all the week for figures ? "

" I am sorry, papa," she replied humbly. " I was behind-hand with the hunt balances you asked me for. If I was wrong, I am very sorry."

At which the baronet returned to silent eating.

There had been guile in Lady Ormond's choice of Sunday afternoon for a full-dress discussion of her daughter's misbehaviour. Sir Harry liked to sleep on Sunday afternoons, and years of habit would not allow him at a moment's notice to escape what had become an almost hallowed drowsiness. On the other hand, his extreme pre-luncheon violence made it impossible for him to refuse further debate when it was offered. As he stumped before his wife from dining-room to library, his eyelids were already on the droop. He blew his nose and began walking up and down the room. His chair yawned pleasantly. Bravely he looked away and walked the quicker.

"Now, Mary, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me how far *you* are responsible for this outrageous incident?"

"The banns you mean, Harry? I am not responsible in the sense that I suggested, or even approved, their being put up; but I went with Catherine on Friday afternoon to see Mr. Chater, because she asked me to."

"You should have done nothing of the sort. It was direct encouragement."

Lady Ormond was turning her wedding ring round a plump white finger.

"Not encouragement," she said quietly. "None was needed."

"That is quibbling," he snapped. "You can surely stop a girl of twenty doing what her parents disapprove?"

"Catherine is twenty-three, Harry. The point is important."

He glared at her, gauging her meaning:

"Do you mean to tell me," he shouted, "that because the chit is legally of age I am to have no power over her? What do I care if she is twice of age? She is my daughter and will do as I bid."

Lady Ormond shook her head.

"That is all very well," she said, "but let us face the facts. This is eighteen sixty-eight, not eighteen-thirty. You cannot lock a girl up for years in these days or send her to some remote house where no one can find her. You *can not do it*, Harry, so it's no use even wishing that you could. As for these banns, she came to me and said she was going to ask Mr. Chater to put them up and would I go with her? What was I to do? If I had said no, she would have gone just the same and the thing would have looked strange. So I said yes; and went. I do not see how else I could have acted."

"And if she *had* gone alone, do you think Chater would have dreamed of doing what a crazy girl wanted without asking me? Of course he wouldn't. Your being there made all the difference. If you had not acted like a fool, this thing would never have been made public."

"Mr. Chater could not refuse, Harry. She took the—the—Mr. Martindale's written authority with her. No clergyman would venture to refuse the sanction of the Church to such a marriage. There is no moral obstacle and no legal one. That is what I mean when I say that Catherine being of age——"

He jerked his hand for silence.

"You seem to forget the other side to this question, Mary. It is not purely a personal one. Society must have its upper and its lower rooms. Those who are put to rule over their fellows are not free to act just as they like. Royalty is the extreme case. You come down by degrees, and you arrive at such a man as I. I try to do my duty by Fleddon, and it is often hard enough. It would be impossible, if I were not punctilious over such things as dignity—although I daresay dignity means little enough to silly girls—or to silly old women either."

She winced. He was pressing her at her weakest point and she shared too fully his opinions to find reply come easily.

"Oh, it *does* mean something, Harry; indeed it does. And I know how difficult a time you often have and that this threatens to make it more difficult. But——"

"More than that," he broke in. "This is a small place and I am only one individual. But I belong to a class and that class has a definite duty. We are trained to govern others and means are given to us to set our minds free for the work of government. The barriers set up by society between one class and another are not senseless. They have a *reason*—namely to prevent the mingling of coarser with finer strains. What do you suppose would happen if girls could marry any one they chose? Where would it stop? We should have a duke's daughter running off with a crossing sweeper and the son of a prime minister setting up a wash-house with his wife's mangle. The line must be drawn, Mary, and no sentimental heroics about true love can alter the necessity. Quite apart from my personal feeling, I have a duty to my order, and that duty I shall do."

"So far as you can," she put in. "And you *do* do it, Harry. You do it nobly. But in this wretched business you are kicking against the pricks——"

"Which you and a disobedient girl have put ready for me," he retorted roughly. "These banns for instance! Isn't it enough to be defied by my own wife and daughter, without the added insult of public scandal?"

This was Lady Ormond's cue. Here was opportunity of getting away from unanswerable social argument. She pulled herself together.

"Harry," she said gravely. "Listen to me. I have not——"

As he still roamed up and down the room, she broke off and called: "Come and sit down, Harry! I can't talk to you while you walk about all the time."

UPB

A little to his own surprise he obeyed, and subsided into his chair. It was certainly very comfortable.

Lady Ormond began again:

"I have not wanted this marriage any more than you have. I have done all I can to stave it off and to cure Catherine of what I first took to be a girlish infatuation. I still wish that the whole thing had never occurred, for I agree with all you say about the danger of mixing classes of society. But I do not now see that it can be prevented. She is absolutely determined to marry this man and, whether we like it or not, with all the risks and discomforts that may be involved in it, she will do so!" He stirred angrily, but she held up her hand. "Let me go on. Quite seriously, Harry, neither you nor I can stop her. We can *forbid;* but what is the use of forbidding if we cannot in the last resort enforce what we say? You realise what will happen, Harry? You understand that she will go in any case—that, if she has not our consent, she will go without it?"

He was now a little drowsy, exhausted by his own harangue and, in exhaustion, soothed (as Lady Ormond intended that he should be) by the continuous murmur of his wife's words. But he roused himself to growl:

"That she will not! I'll have no runaway daughters from my house!"

"But, Harry, she *will!* You may hinder her for a week or a month, but sooner or later she'll give you the slip. And then? You spoke just now of public scandal. What is scandalous in a crying of banns compared to that of a daughter turned refugee?"

And the good lady, now well warmed to her subject and with all her tremors stilled, proceeded, as Hugh Crossley had urged her, to a sensational picture of the effects on Sir Harry's dignity and local reputation which would be caused by Catherine's flight from home. She estimated the effect of such a notoriety on the whole class of which Sir Harry was so conscientious a member. She spoke of the unscrupulous use to which the incident would be put in disparaging the very aristocratic caste, for whose reputation he had such care. Then finally, when he was so overcome with sleep and argument that he had ceased even to move impatiently and grunt at any word of hers to which he took exception, she rose and, sitting on his chair-arm, laid her hand on his:

"Be kind to her, Harry," she said. "She is nearer fairyland than she will ever be again. We were near fairyland once, my dear. Do you remember? Do you remember when we went that long ride on the moors near Appleby? I was staying with my Uncle Walter and you came over. How I watched for you along the road that went for miles over the hills—up and down, up and down! And when you did come—I hadn't seen you for a week, Harry, and it seemed a year!—we had to sit impatiently through luncheon, while dear Uncle Walter talked and talked. . . . And then at last we slipped away and rode—oh, ever so far—right into fairyland or nearly so——. Do you remember that, Harry? And then in Switzerland, on our honeymoon, the verandah of the hotel at Weggis, and the moon shining on the lake . . . and how we went out together in the little boat and heard the girl's voice singing on the shore? . . . We were very happy, were we not, my dear? And ever since we have not quarrelled a great deal? Will you not be kind to your little Catherine, who loves this man and has not seen him properly for far, far longer than a week? Will you not believe that she loves him as—as I have loved you, Harry? It is real love. No fancy could survive what Catherine has had to bear. She loves the man, Harry—*loves* him. Do you understand? She could be as happy as we were, if you would let her. You would not spoil such happiness as that? You could not——"

He took his hand away and, shifting in his chair, buried his head in the corner farthest from his wife.

"I'm sleepy," he muttered gruffly. "You go talking on. . . . Leave me alone. . . . But you're not a silly old woman, Mary. . . . ."

POSTSCRIPT

Obedience, for all that it deals with an English county family in the eighteen-sixties, is not a pastiche of a mid-Victorian fiction. It is rather one side of a medallion—a medallion struck to commemorate the passing of a social code.

Manners adjust themselves and principles evolve but slowly. We speak of the great changes wrought in England by the wracking terror of the war-years; but in fact this evil period was but a last and wildest tempest, beating against great trees already hollow to bring them crashing down. The morning after a night of storm unveils a desolation; but as we gaze on the catastrophe and grieve, we tell ourselves that earlier or later such calamity were certain, for in the shadows of our memory the mist and tears of many a rainy autumn linger.

Viewing the social landscape of our England, we mark supremacies destroyed and firm beliefs uprooted, but know that not the war alone could thus have made a skittle-alley of its well-timbered slopes. The rot has been for seasons creeping, creeping . . . and not a decade but has weakened here or there the seeming sturdiness of our inheritance.

CONSTABLE

ROBERT KEABLE
Numerous Treasure
By the Author of "Simon Called Peter," etc.

MICHAEL SADLEIR
Obedience
By the Author of "Privilege" and "Desolate Splendour."

ANTHONY RICHARDSON
Ransom
By the author of "Word of the Earth."

Mrs VICTOR RICKARD
Upstairs
By the Author of "Old Sins Have Long Shadows."

STEPHEN HUDSON
Myrtle
By the Author of "Tony," "Richard Kurt," etc.

Mrs HICKS BEACH
Blackmarston
By the Author of "Shuttered Doors."

A. R. WEEKES
Spanish Sunlight
By the Author of "Jenny Essenden," "Nightfall," etc.

H. C. M. HARDINGE
A Bowl of Red Roses
By the Author of "Whirlwind."

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK
The Little French Girl
By the Author of "Tante," "Adrienne Toner."

FICTION